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ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK, N. Y., AT SECOND CLASS MAIL RATES.

Vol. XVI.

Published Every
Week.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., August 30, 1882.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

No. 201

THE PIRATE OF THE PLACERS; or, JOAQUIN'S DEATH-HUNT.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "EQUINOX TOM," "SOL SCOTT," "ALABAMA JOE," "JACK RABBIT," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," "PACIFIC PETE," "OLD '49,"
"THREE-FINGERED JACK," "THE LONG-HAIRED EARDS," "JOAQUIN THE SADDLE KING," ETC., ETC.



"BEHOLD THE WORK OF JOAQUIN MURIETA! FIRST BLOW, BUT NOT THE LAST!"

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OR,

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CHAPTER I.

VENGEANCE FOR THE PAST.

"HERE'S good-luck to the work this night, mates!"

A deep, rich voice, with just the least touch of the "brogue" in it—barely enough of the "burr" to mark the speaker as a lineal descendant of the "Gem of the Sea." In nothing else did he betray his nativity. Tall, lithe and well built; keen eyes, clear cut features; bronzed skin, brown hair and full beard, both curling; a full mining dress of flannel-shirt, duck overalls heavy horse-hide boots and soft felt hat. A leather belt, furnished with a brace of heavy revolvers and a twelve-inch bowie knife, haft and blade, closely girded his round, compact waist, while in one hand he held up the glass of whisky, as he gave utterance to the toast.

He was one of a dozen or more men congregated in a little half-frame, half-canvas structure, that served the mining camp as a saloon. He was a stranger to the majority of those present, and in fact, had not been in the camp for more than an hour, but like a true son of Erin, that short period had been sufficient to place him hand-in-glove with the gold-diggers, more especially as he brought exciting news from up-country.

"Ef thar's any fun goin' on," cried a heavily-bearded digger, as he set down his glass with a thump on the bar, "I move we go 'long. We kin draw lots to see who shall stay back to see that no critter jumps our claims—"

"No use, unless you've got a bit o' paper the like o' that," interrupted the Irishman, exhibiting a small slip of pasteboard, bearing some printed words, with the name "Thomas Lynch," in writing upon it. "You can go to town, and mighty glad I'll be for the good company on the road, but you couldn't attend the meeting without an invitation like this same."

"Durned high-toned, 'pears to me," growled Hercules, and the Irishman perfectly understood the meaning of the peculiar chill which fell upon the group.

"Style" was at a heavy discount among the honest miners, and any one suspected of trying to put on "frills" or "scalops," was regarded as little better than a horse-thief.

"Not high toned—only prudent," Lynch said. "Look at it in the right light. For nearly a year now, honest blood has been flowing almost every day. Not a week passes by but what there is talk of more murders, more dead and robbed bodies being found here and there—everywhere. After each one, there is a great cry and fuss. Kill the hell-hounds! Men drop work to take up the bloody trail, but what has it all amounted to? A few poor devils shot or lynched; but who can swear that they were more guilty than those who butchered them? No one. Simply because the blows were dealt first, without any pretense at investigation on the part of those who meant to avenge outraged justice."

Rapidly he spoke; like one who deeply feels the truth of what he utters, but pausing abruptly as the dark looks and contracting brows about told him that his sentiments were dangerous ones, uttered there. Only for a moment he hesitated, then added in the same frank tone:

"Rough words, you think. Well, the time was, and not so very long ago, either, when I would have flared up at the charge, even as you are doing now. No man could catch hold of a rope quicker than I when a dust-robber or a horse-thief was at the other end, or hoist away mere heartily than this same lad; and I was too apt to take suspicion as gospel proof, just as many a better man has before me."

"Suspicion in this land, where the trickeries of lawyers are unknown, is pretty apt to strike monstrous nigh the bull's-eye," uttered one of the men, rather better dressed than the others, dark and fine-looking, a typical Southerner. "It is safest to cut such a job short and clean. If honest, the fellow gets to heaven all the sooner, and if a criminal, that ends the business."

"Not always," quickly answered Tom Lynch. "But it's mighty dry talking. Fill up once more, and let me tell you how I became converted from those very views."

There was no objection. Everybody drank in those days, and never so cheerfully as when some other generous soul was footing the bill.

"It started at Hangtown, nearly a year ago. A couple of young Mexicans were caught ridin' horses which were claimed as stolen property, and they were hung at once. There was an

other man belonging to the party, brother to the oldest man hung, and somehow he managed to escape the crowd by desperate riding. That same night he run into our camp, at Murphy's Diggings, and the mare he rode was recognized as one stolen from a man in our party. She dropped dead, and as the fellow could show no paper for her, only saying that he borrowed her of a friend, a noose was quickly rigged for his benefit.

"Some of the party started off to the ranch of the man—Melchoir Isturitz was his name—near Hangtown, to see what truth there was in the story. They could only learn that the mare had been picked up as an estray, and not believing this story, hung the ranchero to his own roof-tree!"

"They rode back as fast as horse-flesh could carry them, to serve our prisoner the same, but he was gone before they returned, luckily for his neck."

"You let him go? No doubt you pleaded for his life—using the same arguments with which you have favored us," said the Southerner, showing his white teeth in a peculiar smile.

The Irishman gazed at him for a moment, his color changing a little at that cold, poorly-disguised sneer. But then he quietly added:—

"Better for me, perhaps, if I had, unless I am following a blind lead now. No, the man who owned the mare, Ned Butler, was my mate, and I was to the full as hot as he for the greaser to pull hemp. Most of the boys sided with us, but Will Kearney, a lad white clean through, stood up for the poor devil, and we let him off with a licking that tore his back into bloody ribbons. He told us, before a blow was struck, that we had far better kill him outright. We would have done it, too, in spite of Kearney and his pistols, only we saw that the greaser dreaded the lash more than he did the rope."

"I've known slaves that had the same fool-notions," laughed the Southerner. "But your conversion? Was it the sight of blood that turned your stomach?"

The Irishman flushed hotly and his eyes flashed, not as much at the words as the manner in which they were spoken. In a deep, pointed tone, he retorted:—

"It's a free man, not a slave, that's forinst ye now, honey—and an Irishman at that! Devil a conversion so thorough that an Irish lad isn't ready to take a hint that points toward a shindy. It's a sharp point you've got to the tongue on ye, but it's a pity ye can't speak out plain what ye want. If it's a row ye're after—"

"I never quarrel before dinner, my dear sir," said the Southerner, not a little to the wonder and disappointment of his fellows, who, digger-like, were always ready to see and enjoy a "circus." "I assure you, I meant no harm."

"Then none is taken," was the frank response. "But I thought you meant—"

"Only impatient to learn what caused you to change your mind—what converted you, to use your own words. Fill up once more—set 'em up, Dave—and please go on."

"It's easy told. Those two men were hung wrongfully—the rascals who swore against them have confessed as much, and even gave the names of the scoundrels who hired them to do it. And Isturitz also was innocent. The story he told was a straight one, and the mare was given to Joaquin Murieta through the mistake of a herder. Three were hung and another flogged almost to death! Is that not enough to convert any honest-meaning man?"

"Joaquin Murieta?" uttered the Southerner, musingly, "I do not remember ever hearing the name before."

"You'll hear enough of it in a day or two, unless I am following a blind lead," quickly added Lynch. "All California will ring with it, when the truth is known."

"Then you think—"

"That Joaquin Murieta could, if he would, solve much of the mystery that surrounds these many foul murders."

"Of course you have proof?"

"Come to Marysville and attend the meeting that is called for to-night, which you can do if you have good vouchers, and you shall hear what proofs I have to offer. I will say this much, however: Five of the men who helped flog Joaquin that day have been killed. Seven of those who helped to hang his brother Carlos have died—murdered by bullet or steel."

"Suspicious, decidedly; but still not proof. That is, such as would be accepted in a court of law. Out here it is more than enough. Why have you waited so long? Nearly a year, you say."

"Since the lynching, yes. Six months since the first murder. Three months since my suspicions were aroused, and since that time I have not been idle, though I have kept a close tongue between my lips. Once I had judged this fellow wrongfully. I would not repeat the fault. I watched and waited until I was sure. Then I sent word to—to a man whom I knew could be trusted, and, as an answer, came this card, with notice of the meeting called for to-night at Marysville. I set out, and here I am. I stopped here for a wee dram, and somehow my tongue run away with me."

"There's no harm done," suddenly said one of the party, who had not yet spoken. "I can answer for every one here. I have a card—see," and he exhibited the mate to the bit of pasteboard shown by Tom Lynch, differing only in the name written upon it.

"Good!" cried the Irishman. "We'll make the rest of the trip together, for I'm tired of my own company—"

"If you have a horse, and can wait until six o'clock, all right. I can't go sooner. Indeed, I had not intended going at all, until I heard what you said, for I thought it would be all talk, without coming to anything. As it is, I'll go, though I may be late."

"Faith it's shanks' mare alone that I'm riding," said Lynch, ruefully.

"Then we can't go in company; but I'll see you at the meeting. One more drink, and then you'll come take a bite of dinner with me."

Neither invitation was refused, and it was nearly two hours past noon when Tom Lynch left the little mining camp behind him, and turned his face once more toward the lively town of Marysville, still half-a-dozen miles away.

The worthy Irishman, feeling the effects of the liquor he had drank, plodded along steadily, and he had not covered more than one-third of the distance when he heard the sharp clatter of a horse's hoofs behind him.

The times were truly perilous ones, and the spot a lonely one, therefore it is not to be wondered at that Lynch felt for his revolver as he wheeled about, facing the reckless rider. But his fears were as quickly dispelled as he recognized the horseman.

It was the Southerner, who drew rein as he came alongside the pedestrian, greeting him cordially, at the same time dismounting and walking beside him.

"I've changed my mind," he said, lightly. "If you have no objection, I will keep you company into Marysville."

"Not the least taste in the world," cordially responded the Irishman, who was just far enough gone in his cups to feel like welcoming the veriest mangy cur as a relief from his own society. "Divil the man I know that I'd rather see this moment than your own sweet self, barring that you've got an ugly sneer of your own whenever you take a notion to look crossways at a fellow!"

The Southron laughed softly, as though he had received a compliment rather than otherwise. Nor was the blunt remark intended to cause hard feelings. Always frank, Lynch was doubly so now, and gave free utterance to whatever thought came uppermost in his mind.

"I was deeply interested in your story of this Joaquin—what did you say his name was?"

"Joaquin Murieta," promptly replied the Irishman.

"Exactly: these greasers have such twistified names, that my tongue can hardly get around them. Well, as I had nothing particular on hand for this evening, I thought I would try and form one of the company at the meeting to-night."

"With a card, it'll be easy enough," said Lynch.

"Or an introduction from one of the head movers in the affair," laughed the Southron, meaningly. "For instance, Henry Martin, or Captain Harry Love—"

The Irishman stared at him in wonder.

"Who the divil are they?"

"The prime movers in the affair. I was only trying you, back yonder. It was through me that you received the call to attend this meeting. I wished to be sure that I had not mistaken my man, and for that reason I met you on the road. If you had not rung true metal when I sounded you, that ticket was to be recalled and you prevented from entering the hall to-night."

More and more amazed grew the Irishman. He stared at the smiling Southron, the picture of bewilderment.

A low, soft laugh came through the heavy beard.

"You seem astonished, my dear sir. Yet there is little to wonder at. I vouched for you, to those gentlemen, for I had reason to believe that you could give some very important information, if you saw fit. Yet even I hardly dared hope for as much as you say you can furnish."

The Irishman stopped short and confronted the man.

"Who are you? You seem to know me, my business, my character, and all about me. Make the game a little more even, or divil the step further do we travel in company—d'ye mind that, now?"

Again that laugh, soft and mellow, yet strangely tantalizing and anger-provoking.

"My dear fellow, do you really mean to say that you do not recognize me?" he said, in an amused tone.

"Divil a bit do I!" was the prompt response.

With a motion quick as light, the man raised his left hand and tore the heavy beard from his face. The same gesture pushed back the slouched hat from his brow. His black eyes glowed like living coals of fire. His white, even teeth gleamed against his red lip, while his thin

nostrils quivered like those of some infuriated wild beast.

"Now do you recognize me, dog—hell-hound?" he snarled, the very personification of malignant rage and hatred.

"Holy Mother!" gasped the Irishman, turning white, and trembling like a leaf. "That man—"

"Yes, that man—JOAQUIN MURIETA!" snarlingly interjected the other, his long knife flashing forth.

The Irishman's hand dropped to his revolver, but he was not given time to draw the weapon. A hand of steel was fastened upon his throat, and eight inches of steel grated through cartilage and flesh, searching for the seat of life.

A hoarse, choking cry, and Tom Lynch tore himself from the grasp of the avenger. But it was only to reel and fall heavily to the ground.

"You've killed me!" he gasped, huskily, his head drooping, his senses reeling.

"As I swore I would on that day when you helped to flog me like a dog!" cried the avenger, more than ever like a wild beast, with flakes of froth dropping from his lips. "Five of that brutal gang have gone over the range before you, sent by my hand. You are the sixth, and the rest shall follow. I swear it!"

With a desperate effort, the dying man rallied. He jerked the revolver from its scabbard, but before he could raise either the hammer or the weapon itself, a swift-aimed bullet from the outlaw's pistol shattered his knuckles. Stung with pain, and further nerved by that longing for revenge which all stout-hearted men feel, Tom Lynch struggled to his feet, grasping the blood-dripping revolver with his left hand. But once more he was foiled.

Lithe as a panther, Joaquin Murieta leaped upon him, striking a swift, downright blow with his keen-edged, heavy knife. And, with his left hand hanging only by a strip of skin, poor Lynch sunk to the ground.

Both hands crippled, knowing that he had received his death-wound—that his life was rapidly ebbing from the ghastly cut in his bosom, from which the red blood poured in jets as he gasped for breath—little wonder that the courage of the doomed man failed him.

"Mercy!" he panted, painfully, piteously—but there was no mercy for him, no pity in the heart of the bloodthirsty avenger.

"Mercy!" he echoed, kneeling beside the dying wretch, brandishing the blood-dripping steel before his eyes. "Did you show mercy to me, when my only crime was being one of the accursed 'greasers,' and in your power? Was you full of mercy then? Did you plead with your comrades to spare me—to lay on the degrading lashes more lightly? No! you looked on and laughed! I saw you! Your hand was itching to take the whip from your mate and deal the biting blows yourself! I swore then to have revenge—to kill you, one and all—to out-devil even such devils! And thus I keep my oath!"

"Spare me—let me die—in peace!"

The poor fellow did not know what he was saying. The words dropped from his lips in feeble gasps.

As well plead with a wounded tigress whose dead cubs lie before her eyes!

"Did you spare me? Did they spare my brother? Did they have mercy on my wife?" snarled Joaquin, now fairly mad with rage and bloodthirstiness.

"My brother—John Lynch—he fought for her—your wife!" gasped the Irishman, his memory returning as it so frequently does when death is hanging over one, as now. "Mercy—in his name—by your oath!"

Hot and savage came the answer:

"I know only one brother—the one that was foully murdered by just such hell-hounds as you! I remember only one oath—to kill you and your mates whenever I can meet them! Die, dog! For Carmela—for Carlos—for me—die! die! die!"

At every word the bloody blade rose and fell. After the first blow, it was a corpse the madman was mutilating, but he paused not for that. He snarled savagely at every jet of red blood. Froth flew from his gnashing teeth. He was no longer a man—a human being. He was a ravening wild beast, whose horrible thirst could only be quenched with blood such as this—the blood of those who had transformed him from an honest man into a demon!

CHAPTER II.

ONE MAN AND TWO WOMEN.

"WHAT, Lura, not crying?" and his strong arm stole caressingly about the round, trim little waist as he spoke.

The girl yielded to his touch and bravely choked back the painful sobs that still shook her frame.

"I could not help it, Theodore," she murmured, raising her face from his breast until the growing twilight fell full upon it. "Ever since this meeting was first spoken of, it has filled me with a dread I cannot account for. It seems as though the end must be bloodshed—"

"So we pray and trust, little one," the young man interposed, with a light laugh, as his bronzed hand tenderly smoothed her sunny

hair. "The disease has grown so desperate that only desperate remedies can do any good. Blood will be shed, but only to save that of honest men."

"But why need you go?" the maiden asked, coaxingly. "Surely there are enough without you."

"What would he say?" laughed the young man. "What would your father think were I to play skulker in a cause he feels so much interest concerning? Why, pet, he would denounce me as a traitor—he would be more than ever convinced that I am unworthy of his treasure—and you know what a difficult struggle it has been, Lura, on my part, to progress as far as this. Surely you would not have me risk all, now that the glorious end is so near?"

Swiftly the words fell from his lips, his deep, mellow voice ringing with strong passion as he drew the lithe yet now trembling form closer to his breast. The twilight fell full upon his face as he slightly changed his position, revealing one who might well have won the first heart-love of even so beautiful a maiden as Lura Martin.

A face that was almost too handsome for a man, yet there was nothing of softness or effeminacy about it. His features were almost classically regular. His hair was jetty black and worn long upon his shoulders. His eyes large and brilliant. His skin a healthful, rich bronze. A jetty mustache shaded, but did not entirely conceal, a well-formed mouth, red lips and white, even teeth. In that dim light his face seemed perfection itself, and his figure was in perfect keeping with it, tall, square shouldered, lithe and active, yet endowed with a strength far beyond the average powers of man.

His dress was neat and plain, of the cut typical of the California miner, but of finer materials and clean. Above his waist was clasped a belt of weapons, worn with the careless ease of one long familiar with their use.

Such was Theodore Freeman, a native of South Carolina, as he said, who had suddenly appeared in that part of the country a few months before. Chance brought him in contact with Henry Martin, the father of Lura, and through him the young couple became acquainted, though the old gentleman soon saw cause to regret that fact. Almost immediately Freeman became a suitor for Lura's hand, and played his part so well that before the father, just then a little "off," owing to his unfortunate weakness for strong drink, suspected the danger, the girl's love was wholly gained.

To do him simple justice, Freeman acted a manly part, speaking to the old gentleman before uttering the momentous words to the daughter, but he felt sure that his cause was won in the latter quarter, well enough.

Martin stormed and raged, according to his wont when matters happened contrary to his liking, but Freeman met him firmly. He was willing to submit to any reasonable probation; anything save give up his love.

He was not a favorite in that section. Perhaps it was because he never joined in the rough orgies and drinking bouts of the miners and stockmen; perhaps because he was too proud, dignified, and somewhat inclined to "put on airs," as some said.

Who was he? where had he come from? what was his business? Such were some of the many questions asked, but each curious one had to answer them himself and of course the conclusions drawn were not very favorable to Theodore Freeman.

He rode fine horses, he had plenty of money, and could spend it lavishly whenever the occasion arose. Yet he did not work, unless it was when some one of the many irons which Henry Martin had in the fire, needed a helping hand. Then he could and did labor with both brain and muscle.

It is not necessary to give in detail the arguments pro and con, which passed between the lover and the father of the maiden whom he sought for a wife. Enough that the result was a compromise: Freeman agreed to wait until Martin could thoroughly investigate his antecedents, before avowing his love to the one most deeply interested. Freeman furnished the father with several addresses, and the letters of inquiry were written.

For some time after this agreement was made, Freeman kept his part of the contract, but then his promise was broken. Perhaps it was too much to expect of any merely human man; to be in close communion with one so fair as Lura Martin, knowing that she loves even as she is beloved, and still to resist both his own longing and the mute appeal in those eyes, doubly powerful because wholly unconscious on her part.

What might have been expected really occurred. Freeman forgot his pledge and poured forth his eloquent tale of love. Lura was too honest and too perfectly happy to feign the hesitation and doubt which she was so far from feeling, and her answer was all that the most ardent lover could wish.

Then Theodore told her of the broken compact, and she was readily persuaded that it would be best to keep their betrothal secret

from all others until the answers to those letters could arrive; then all would be well.

It was not a very difficult task. Though Henry Martin was still suspicious, far from placing implicit trust in the dashing young stranger, he was too often under the baleful influence of strong drink to guard his daughter properly, while his wife, whose affection for Freeman was only second to that felt by Lura, aided in bringing the lovers together, rather than sought to keep them apart.

This much by way of explanation is strictly necessary to a full understanding of what is to follow.

"It may not be so near—the end may be very different from what you think," was the response, low, yet painfully distinct. "No," the maiden added, as Freeman moved so that the failing light fell more fully upon her face, his dark eyes seeming to pierce her very brain, so intense was their gaze. "You cannot wrong me, even in thought. You know too well how perfect is my love and trust. You know that you are my all—that without you I would wither and die like a plucked flower."

More she would have said, but those strong arms were clasped about her, she was drawn still closer to his breast, and his lips pressed hers repeatedly.

For a moment Lura yielded, then gently drew back.

"Ever since this meeting was first spoken about, I have felt a presentiment of impending evil. Something tells me that it will end in bitter sorrow to us all. You smile—I cannot help it. There is blood before my eyes! And through that horrible red mist, I see a form—it bears your face! Oh! my love! Do not refuse me almost the first request I have ever made you—promise me that you will not attend this meeting. Make some excuse—"

"Come, Freeman," cried the impatient voice of Henry Martin, from the stables, only a few rods from the house. "We are late already. We'll have to ride mighty lively, or they'll think we've gone back on them, sure!"

"Ride on, and I'll catch you up before you've gone a quarter," promptly cried the young man.

The lovers could just distinguish a low, surly growl as the ranchero mounted his horse and rode away down the road leading to Marysville.

"There is your answer, pet," said Freeman, laughingly. "It is not much of an excuse that the old gentleman wants, and were I to show the white feather now, it would be a sufficient handle for him to forever break with me. I cannot afford to run the risk of losing my prize before it is fairly won, even to humor you in this wild fancy—for fancy it is, as the near future will surely show you, darling."

"It is no fancy, Theo. If we part now, if you attend this meeting, I know that we will never be more to each other than we are now. If the words had come down from heaven to my ears, I could not be more sure! Some terrible misfortune will overwhelm us. You will die, or be killed—there is that frightful vision of blood again! Oh! Theodore, for my sake—"

"For your sake, even more than my own, I must go, darling," said the young man, just a little impatiently. "It would be fatal to our dearest hopes were I to fail your father now. Be a brave girl—there!" and he kissed her pale lips repeatedly. "We will laugh together over your foolish forebodings, to-morrow. Until then, good-by!"

Tearing himself from her clinging embrace, Freeman leaped into the saddle and rode swiftly down the road, anxious to overtake his prospective father-in-law.

Scarcely had the noble animal which he bestrode, taken a dozen leaps, when a dark figure sprang out from a clump of timber and undergrowth beside the road, uttering a sharp cry. The spirited creature bounded violently to one side, with a terrified snort, and superb rider though he was, Theodore Freeman came very near losing his seat. For one instant his face was turned toward the cause of his horse's alarm, but whether or no he recognized it, can only be surmised. Certain it is that he did not pause to investigate, but driving his spurs rowel deep in the ribs of his snorting steed, he raced down the road like an arrow fresh loosed from the bow.

The dark shape followed for a few rods, but then, as if recognizing the folly of hoping to overtake the rider, turned back and rapidly approached the spot where Lura still stood.

She had heard the cry and seen the figure try to intercept her lover, and that dread presentiment of coming evil gained redoubled force. Just why, she could not have explained, but something told her that a dreadful blow awaited her, and that it was coming from this woman—for such she now saw that dark figure was.

The woman did not pause until their persons were almost touching each other. There was a wild, feverish light in her large, dark eyes—a light that chilled Lura's blood and almost stopped the pulsation of her heart.

"Who was he—that man?" demanded the woman, her voice low and strained, one hand clutching the maiden's shoulder with a force

that deeply indented the tender flesh. "You were talking with him—you must know who he is?"

She spoke in Spanish, a language with which Lura was fairly familiar, but the maiden was too frightened to answer promptly.

With an impatient cry, the woman shook her violently, then spoke again, this time in English.

"Speak! who is he—that man? Tell me his name, or—"

Rallying, Lura shook off that painful grasp, and said:

"What right have you to question me in such a tone?"

A bitter laugh cut her indignant speech short.

"What right? You dare ask me that?" the woman said, her black eyes flashing even more vividly than before. "By the right of a wronged and deserted wife—"

A gasping cry broke from the pale lips of the poor girl. Let the blow she had foreboded take any shape but this! She could better bear to know her lover dead than such a foul traitor as these hot words implied. But it was a lie! He was not false! A foul lie, or else some terrible mistake.

Her usual courage returned as if by magic. She confronted the Spanish woman defiantly at first, then almost pityingly.

"You do not know what you are saying, poor woman—"

A long, slender dagger flashed before her eyes.

"Not your pity—another word in that tone, and I will let out your heart's blood!" cried the woman, savagely. "You may have robbed me of his love, but you shall not triumph over me that far! Once more I ask you the name of the man from whom you just parted—the man whose kisses are still warm on your lips! Tell me, and beware how you attempt to deceive me!"

As the Spanish woman's rage grew hotter, Lura waxed more calm, though she began to believe that she had to do with a madwoman. She felt that her life depended upon her coolness and presence of mind. She was wholly unarmed, and though the house and stables were so near at hand—though she knew that a single cry would speedily bring her help—she also knew that the Spanish woman could slay her at a single blow, before the appeal for aid could hardly pass her lips.

"His name is Theodore Freeman—"

The mood of the strange woman changed like magic. She replaced the dagger in her bosom, and fell upon her knees before Lura, her clasped hands uplifted, hot tears streaming from her eyes, while her voice was broken and unsteady as she spoke:

"For the love of Our Mother in Heaven, do not deceive me now, lady! If you knew all—if you could only realize how terribly I have suffered, you would have mercy on me and tell me the truth!"

Lura was powerfully moved. Her presentiment of evil was forgotten. She only remembered that here was a poor, suffering creature who sadly needed comfort.

"You are ill," she said, sympathetically, trying to raise the woman to her feet. "Come with me to the house, and we will do what we can for you—my mother and I."

The woman stared at her with a dazed look, making no effort to arise, but lying a dead weight upon the maiden's hands. Thus for a few moments, then she wrested herself free and fell prostrate upon the ground, sobbing as though her heart would break.

Lura stood beside her for a moment in doubt, then turned and ran rapidly to the house, from whence she speedily returned, accompanied by her mother, bearing food and a bottle of native wine.

In obedience to a gesture from her mother, Lura stood aside. With a tact peculiarly her own, Mrs. Martin ministered to the stranger, who was soon eating and drinking like one nearly famished. At the same time her hysterical excitement moderated, and when the motherly housewife began to question her gently yet closely, she was able to tell a connected story.

It was a sad, heart-rending record of woman's trust and man's treachery, which need only be glanced at in this connection.

Her name was Lota Sylva, the only child of a small ranchero in Lower California. Her mother was an English woman, who lived only long enough to teach her child that language then faded away and died. Poor and ignorant though she was, Lota never knew sorrow until a woman grown, when a handsome stranger came to their lonely ranch. From that day the poor girl's fate was sealed.

Both father and daughter were fascinated by the handsome, dashing stranger, who gave his name as Raymon Salcedo. He was taken ill with a low fever, and for months Lota nursed him, snatching him back from the very brink of the grave. She was too unobedient to conceal her love, and when, as they were out riding one day, Salcedo proposed that they ride still further to where lived a hermit priest, and there become man and wife, she gladly consented.

The ceremony was performed. On the road back, Salcedo suggested that they keep the marriage secret from her father for a few days, by way of a merry jest. His word was law to the trusting girl. Had he asked her life, she would hardly have hesitated in yielding it up on the altar of her overpowering love.

For several months she lived in a fool's paradise of perfect bliss. Life for her during that period seemed a foretaste of Heaven itself. But then came the waking.

The handsome stranger vanished as suddenly as he had dropped down in that lonely spot, without word or sign, to tell whither he had gone or when he would return.

Day after day she waited and watched, until weeks and months went by, until her secret could no longer be kept from the eyes of her father, trusting and nearly blind though he was. Though she grew pale and sorely sick at heart, never once did her faith in the stranger grow weak. As soon would she have doubted Holy Mother herself.

But Manuel Sylva was more worldly wise, and when he learned all, he in a great measure regained the fire of his long-vanished youth.

The hermit priest was sought, but he was dead. Only his skeleton remained, and that bearing the marks of the ravaging wolves' teeth; but in the ghastly skull could still be traced the fatal path of a bullet. He had been murdered—by Raymon Salcedo, to conceal that marriage!

So thought Manuel Sylva, right or wrong.

Gently he broke the terrible truth to the poor girl, but all his care could not lessen the crushing shock. She sunk under the blow, and never knew more until she awoke, a mother!

For nearly a year the past was a merciful blank, but then a party of gold-seekers came upon the lonely ranch, and she heard her father questioning them about Raymon Salcedo. The sound of that name awoke her sleeping memory, and what she heard from the gold-hunters led to her stealing away from home in the dead of night, taking with her her little boy-baby.

"I found his home at last," she continued, speaking in a dull, monotonous tone, like one half asleep or worn out by long-continued fatigue, "but he was gone. They would not listen to my story. They laughed at me at first, and called me mad, but then they grew angry and drove me away in the stormy night, threatening to hunt me off the place with dogs."

"I do not know how long ago that was, or where I wandered after that. I only know that I awoke here, this evening, to see him, Raymon Salcedo, my husband, the father of my child, clasping you in his arms—raining kisses upon your lips, even as he once showered them upon me."

"Oh! lady!" she added, falling upon her knees and with clasped hands looking up into the pale face of Lura Martin, "have mercy on a poor, heart-stricken woman! Do not rob me of him! You are young and lovely—life is all before you—but I—if I lose him, I lose all!"

There was no acting in this. Be she sane, or be she mad, the woman firmly believed that Theodore Freeman was Raymon Salcedo, her betrayer.

Faint and heartsick, but outwardly calm and composed, Lura Martin had listened to it all. She remembered that dread presentiment of impending evil, and though it had taken a different shape from that which she saw in her vision, she began to believe that this was the blow fate held in store for her.

Her mother moved closer to her child's side, but Lura smiled faintly at the fear she read in that face.

Her voice was low, but steady as she spoke:

"It is a sad story that you tell—a terrible charge which you bring against one whom we have ever regarded as the soul of honor and truth itself. You cannot wonder if we doubt your being correct—not in the story you tell, but in declaring Mr. Freeman your husband."

"I saw him as he stood here—I saw his face as he rode past me," quickly replied Lota. "Could I be mistaken after all that has passed between him and me?"

"You are willing to repeat your charges, in his presence?"

"Not charges—I have no complaint—he had good reasons, no doubt, though I cannot divine them now, my poor brain is in such a whirl! It will be all right when we meet, face to face. Even your beauty will not be a bar between us then, for he loved me very dearly—he told me so often, and swore it on the holy cross! He may have forgotten, but he will remember when he hears my voice—when he looks upon the face of his little boy, and hears him lispingly call him papa! He will remember then—you believe it? Say that you don't think he will be angry because we followed him?"

Feverishly she spoke, now proud and exultant, then fearfully, as the painfully-conflicting emotions in her poor brain gained the ascendancy.

It was pitiful to see, still more piteous to hear, and sore as was her heart, it ached even for the poor, half-crazed victim of man's perfidy, as Lura looked down upon Lota Sylva.

"Come to the house," she said, at length.

"You are ill, and need rest before you meet—that man," after a brief hesitation. "He will not return to-night, but you shall meet him tomorrow. Until then, be our guest."

But the woman rose to her feet, shrinking back from the extended hand, crying:

"No—not now. My child needs me—I must go to him."

Lura tried to speak, but her tongue failed her. Mrs. Martin understood her painful gesture, and came to her rescue.

"You must come," she said, sternly. "You have made a terrible charge against a man whom we have loved and honored. You shall not go until you have met him face to face, and either proved your words, or owned that you lied. I will send for the child, but I cannot lose sight of you until this terrible affair is settled."

The Spanish woman eluded her grasp and darted away like a startled deer. Mrs. Martin followed, but only for a few paces, for a wild, despairing cry broke upon her ears, and turning, she saw Lura reel and fall at full length upon the ground.

Poor girl! The ordeal had been more than she could bear!

CHAPTER III.

THE MEETING, AND HOW IT ENDED.

"THE gentlemen present will please come to order."

The speaker was Henry Martin, the place a long, low-ceiled hall in Marysville, the gentlemen addressed being some two-score representative men who had just elected him to the chair, while the purpose which brought them together was an important one indeed.

A better choice could hardly have been made, though Henry Martin was but a wreck of his former self—still it was a magnificent wreck. At a time not so very far distant in the past, his intellect had been as gigantic as his person, and few men were better known in legislative halls than the young lawyer, whose sudden and to many unaccountable disappearance was like an eclipse of the sun. Rich, talented and wonderfully eloquent, with countless hosts of friends, the highest office of the land seemed almost within his grasp when he sunk out of sight forever. But few save himself knew why Henry Martin took such a course, and they sacredly kept his secret. In those days all men drank, and if the young lawyer was seen rather the worse for liquor on several occasions, after one of his brilliant triumphs in the forensic arena, no one gave it a second thought, save himself and his more immediate friends. He and they knew that rum had already done its work—that the grave of a suicide was the only alternative to an insane asylum, unless he could break away from the spell of the insidious demon of strong drink. He fled, but it was too late. He was no longer his own master, and finally he brought up in California, where we find him, but the ghost of his former self, his brain but a wreck, his hair snow-white, his herculean frame bowed and trembling, when he should have been barely entering on the prime of life, for he was barely two-score years of age!

Rising to his feet, and leaning his trembling hands upon the table before him, at one end of which sat Theodore Freeman as secretary, Henry Martin addressed the gathering:

"Gentlemen, I need not waste much breath in explaining the purpose which has drawn us together this evening. You all know our object. You know how bitterly we have suffered, either in person or through our friends and relatives."

"For nearly a year we have been living in an epidemic of crime and bloodshed. Men have been robbed, men have been assassinated on every hand—even at our very thresholds. Not singly or in pairs, but by dozens and scores! Hardly a day passes by without adding its grim quota to the terrible total. The knife has claimed its victim here, the deadly revolver has left its mark on yonder corpse, while the discolored throat of a third tells of the fatal lasso being used from some cunning ambush."

"Within a radius of twenty miles extending about this city, I can recall forty-one murders all committed inside of four months! A record for us to be proud of, is it not, gentlemen?"

A deep, hoarse murmur ran through the hall as the speaker paused, his voice husky and faint to take a drink from the tin cup standing by his hand. Water, as the majority supposed; whisky as Theodore Freeman knew, for he had made the substitution by Martin's own request. So terribly had his once wonderful powers and stamina been reduced, that Martin knew he could not speak a score sentences in connected manner without such aid.

"Others have felt this disgrace before us," resumed the chairman, his voice stronger, his utterance more clear. "They have met, organized Vigilance Committees, took saddle and ridden forth to rid our fair land of this bloody curse. But—and I say it more in sorrow than in condemnation or reproach—only to do more harm than good, because they acted without any settled plan, because they were chasing the shadow instead of the substance."

"We must pursue a different course, if we hope for better success. Our first object is to learn at whose door these crimes lay—for that a large majority of the more recent murders have been committed by a regularly organized band of criminals, I feel confident I can prove to you before this meeting comes to an end—and then we can set to work after an intelligent manner."

"I believe a majority of those present will agree with me in this view of the case. And as the easiest method of getting at the bottom facts, I suggest that each gentleman present, who may be in possession of any pertinent information, arise in turn and briefly state his views."

A murmur of approval greeted this conclusion, as Henry Martin sunk back into his chair, ghastly and quivering in every fiber, his strength suddenly failing him.

Theodore Freeman handed him the cup, and a swallow of the liquor it contained served to revive him.

Captain Harry Love, a well known character then, but destined to become still more famous ere that death hunt came to an end, an old Texan ranger and Indian-fighter before the cry of gold went forth from California, arose and expressed his approval of the suggestion made by their honored chairman.

"To my motion," added the blunt hero, "he has said all that there need be said in the way of speech-making. Let each man as called upon, give his facts, as facts, without any additions or comments. In that way we will get at the bottom with the least delay, and be ready for work all the sooner."

"We would like to hear what the delegate from Oroville has to say," observed Henry Martin, as Love subsided.

A tall, fine looking fellow of middle age stepped forward.

"Since we are to be confined to facts, without being permitted to air our opinions and surmises, there is little that I can say," he began, quietly. "But I can at least place you on the trail of the author of one foul murder, and that may lead to more."

"Last week Friday—the very day on which I received notice of this meeting—a party of Mexicans and Americans were brought before me on a charge of fighting and rioting at a fandango which took place the night before. They plead guilty, and were fined. Among them was a man whose name was given as Joaquin Murieta. He said that he had no money with him to pay his fine, but that if Sheriff King, who had them in charge, would go with him to his house, he would settle the amount."

"After some little delay, the others paid for their amusement, and then Sheriff King left the court with his prisoner. The rascal was jolly enough, and played his part so well that poor King was thrown off his guard. They had scarcely cleared the town, and reached a spot where no human eyes were upon them, when the Mexican drew a knife and fatally stabbed poor King, before he realized his danger, or could draw a weapon to defend himself."

A deep, hoarse murmur rose through the hall, for there were many present who knew the unfortunate sheriff and liked him well, but all was still as Henry Martin struck the table before him.

The delegate from Oroville continued:

"The assassin left King for dead, but he was still alive when discovered, and lived long enough to tell his story. The murderer was sought for, but in vain, at least up to the time when I left Oroville for this place."

"Could Sheriff King give any reason for the murder?" asked Martin. "There must have been a cause, and a powerful one, else the man never would have done murder when he must have known that the deed would be laid at his door."

"He could give no explanation further than this: He had been very active in searching for the criminals who have been shedding blood so freely all around us, and had arrested several who are still awaiting trial. He thought that this Joaquin Murieta was possibly connected with them, in some way, and killed him so that he could not bear evidence at their trial."

The delegate from Oroville fell back, as if he had no more to add, and the chairman recognized a man who had betrayed strong excitement during the narration just concluded.

"The delegate from Stanislaus has the floor."

Tall, but little less than six feet in height, weighing some hundred and seventy pounds, without an ounce of superfluous flesh or fat, broad and superbly muscled shoulders; a chest so round and full that he could swing his hands around on a straight line with his shoulders until their backs struck squarely together behind him, at the same time standing so erect and steady that not a drop would be spilled from a cup filled to the brim with water and resting upon his head; a lithe, round waist, with thighs and lower limbs which might serve a sculptor as models of masculine strength and perfection.

His head was massive, covered with curling dark brown hair, and an extraordinarily heavy

pair of mustaches shaded his firm-cut mouth. His large eyes were blue, with a steel-gray tinge. His cheek-bones were rather high and broad, his nose long and straight, his chin long and firm. His garb was simple, made for service, rather than looks. A soft felt hat, now held in his left hand; a blue flannel shirt, corduroy trousers, tucked into the tops of heavy boots, and a belt about his waist where gleamed the polished handles of a bowie knife and a brace of revolvers.

Such was John Lynch, the delegate from Stanislaus.*

"I take it we're here to do justice to all," he began, speaking rapidly, yet like one unused to addressing an assembly. "I don't set myself up as a defender of crime or criminals, but I can't stand by and let the judge give out a false impression, the more so that I know he believes he was telling only the truth."

"I know something of Sheriff Tom King, and more about Joaquin Murieta. If Joaquin really killed him, he only did what I, or you, or any honest man would have done, though maybe we would have chosen a more open style of paying the debt."

"It's an ungrateful task to blacken the memory of a dead man, and I'd much rather some one else had to tell the story. But it's the truth, and you say that is what you want."

"Three months ago, I was partner of Joaquin Murieta, in a claim on the Stanislaus. One day while I was absent after provisions, a gang of devils, in human shape came and tried to drive Joaquin away, swearing that no cursed greaser should dig gold on American soil. He refused to abandon the claim, just as I, or you, would have done. They assaulted him, left him for dead. His young wife—beautiful as an angel, and as pure—tried to defend him. They treated her still worse—some among you must have heard of it. They abused her until they believed that she, too, was dead, then they skulked away like cowardly wolves."

"But neither Joaquin nor his wife were dead, though she died in his arms a few hours later, after restoring him to consciousness and telling him all that had happened."

"Sheriff Tom King was one of that gang. I found this out, and sent him word that I would shoot him on sight. I tried hard to keep my threat, but he fled that part of the country, and I failed to find him. I did not believe he was in California until I heard the judge tell of his death. Then I had to speak. If Joaquin killed him, I say he was fully justified in doing so, and that this crime of his deserves a medal rather than a halter!"

As the impetuous miner subsided, Theodore Freeman rose from his seat at the table and said:

"Unless I am misinformed, there is still more to be told concerning this Joaquin Murieta. Is there a delegate present by the name of Lynch?"

"That is my name," promptly interposed the miner.

"Thomas Lynch, from Murphy's Diggings?"

"No—my handle's John. I have a brother Tom, but whether he hails from Murphy's is more than I can say. But one thing is sure, he ain't here now—"

His speech was cut short by a confused bustle at the door. Martin commanded silence, and all eyes were turned toward the further end of the hall, where the door-keeper was thrusting his head in from the outside, at the same time trying to keep back some impatient party.

"Plase yer honner— Be quiet, yedivil!" the last words uttered with an angry howl as he looked back over his shoulder. "Nobody can't come in afther the matin's opened—thim's the verry worruds the boss yonder was tellin' me—"

"Go in, then, if you won't come out!" thundered an angry voice, and honest Pat was pitched headlong into the room, followed by the man who, a few hours before, invited poor Tom Lynch to eat dinner with him.

With a truly Irish howl of fury, Pat scrambled to his feet and leaped toward the man who had handled him so unceremoniously, but whose back was now turned, closing and locking the door. It might have fared ill with him, for Pat was a full-spurred game-cock, had not several of those nearest the scene seized the irate door-keeper and forcibly restrained him.

Fairly purple in the face with his efforts to restore order by using his fist as a gavel, Henry Martin at first failed to recognize the belated delegate. But John Brown was not one to stick at trifles when fairly roused from his wonted phlegmatic repose, and pocketing the key, he pushed his way through the crowd toward the table, crying:

"There's foul murder being done at our very doors, while you sit here, talking, talking—instead of acting!"

"Order!" sternly cried Martin, as loud cries answered this hot accusation. "The gentleman from Poker Deck has the floor."

Instantly the tumult was stilled, and John Brown spoke:

"I would have been here on time, but for

finding the corpse of a man with whom I ate dinner—a delegate to this meeting. He was dead when I found him, with enough knife-cuts about him to let out the life of a grizzly!"

"Name—name!" cried the crowd, greatly excited.

"I read it on his card—Thomas Lynch!"

"My brother!" cried John Lynch, hoarsely, turning white as death, but before he could move a step, or say more, the door-keeper cried out in a loud tone:

"Divil fly away wid the onmannerly joakin fer a liar! Tom Lynch come in ahead o' him—av ye don't belave it, jest take a luk at this bit o' caird!" and rushing forward, he flung the telltale bit of pasteboard upon the table.

Theodore Freeman snatched it up and glanced at it.

"It is true!" he cried, clearly. "I wrote the name myself, and sent it by a special messenger who delivered it into the hands of Thomas Lynch!"

"Tom!" cried John Lynch, his voice harsh and strained. "Tom! if ye're here, spake out, man!"

For a few moments after this appeal, there was an awful breathless silence, only broken by the stern voice of Theodore Freeman, as he called out:

"Guard the door and windows! Kill any man who attempts to leave the room before this affair is sifted to the bottom! Either Tom Lynch or his assassin is present!"

Promptly his orders were executed. Half a dozen men ranged themselves before the door, while two men guarded each window, all with weapons drawn and ready for instant use, while each man glared suspiciously upon those whom he was not personally acquainted with, in quest of the foul assassin.

"The murderer may be here, but not poor Lynch," said John Brown, stepping to the table and looking at the card. "Yes—I can swear to this card! I noticed this blotch of ink when the poor fellow showed it, from its peculiar shape. I searched the body, but the card was gone. The idea struck me then, that there might be treachery beneath the murder, and for that reason I locked the door when I entered."

"If the assassin is here, he must be found and punished," said Freeman, sternly, taking the management of affairs out of the hands of the chairman, who was leaning back in his chair, faint and unnerved by the extraordinary scene. "Pat, can you point out the man who gave you this card?"

"Sure I could, sor, av I was to clap me two eyes unto him, sor!" replied the puzzled Irishman, scratching his close-cropped skull as he looked about the room with a dazed air. "Sure I noticed the foine b'ard av him at the toime—but a divil a wan do I sae now that looks like that same, at all at all, so I don't!"

John Lynch, pale and haggard, his eyes glowing with mingled fear, hope and revenge, was similarly occupied, but he failed to recognize the object of his search. His brother was not among those present.

Suddenly Pat gave a sharp cry and pointed toward a man in a heavy cloak and slouched hat, standing near the first window at the other end of the hall.

"That's him! I kin swear to his clothes—but the divil has swallied his b'ard, so he has!"

Swift as thought John Lynch leaped to the spot, and lifted the broad hat brim. A sharp cry escaped his lips.

"My God! Joaquin Murieta!" he gasped, in utter amazement, staggering back like one dealt a severe blow.

The involuntary movement probably saved his life, for the stranger struck savagely at him with a clubbed revolver, and though the blow was thus rendered a glancing one, the miner fell to the floor like a log.

Crack—Crack! Two shots that sounded almost like one, and two men fell dead in their tracks, leaving the nearest window unguarded.

A single leap carried the murderer out through the sash, just as the revolvers began to play, but back from the darkness came a taunting laugh, followed by the swift clatter of iron shod hoofs in full gallop.

CHAPTER IV.

AN ACCOMPLISHED SPY.

HOT and eager was the pursuit of Joaquin Murieta, the instant the door could be opened and the narrow stairs cleared, but just as so often occurred in the exciting days yet to come, it was like sending an owl to catch a swallow. It was a blind hunt from first to last, and though it lasted for days, every clue, however faint and deceptive, being followed to the end, or until lost, with the persistence of the bloodhound, the now famous outlaw was never sighted.

Like wild-fire the story had spread, and while the real facts were remarkable enough, countless repetitions so distorted the facts that even Joaquin himself would not be able to recognize his own exploit.

It was all of a piece with his wild life which he had now fairly entered upon. The entering that hall, by means of the card taken from the man who fell beneath his avenging knife, among

* See BEADLE'S DIME LIBRARY No. 165.

men who would tear him limb from limb, were they to recognize him for what he really was; the leap from the window after those swift death-shots, carrying sash and all with him, yet alighting on the ground in safety, nearly a score feet below; this, and his remarkable skill in hiding his trail from so many keen and experienced pursuers, made Joaquin Murieta the popular theme for a great majority of the tongues throughout California during those two days which elapsed before we take up the thread of our record, still in the lively town of Marysville.

Hardly a stone's throw from the Hall in which the meeting had been held, stood a small but substantial house, built of stone, flat-roofed and low, not more than ten feet wide, by double that in length.

Over the low, narrow door hung a small, rudely painted sign, stating that Moses Levi loaned money on good security, and paid cash for gold dust.

On this, the second night after the remarkable escape of Joaquin Murieta from his enemies, a man muffled in a heavy cloak gave a peculiar knock at the door of Levi, the Jew.

He was almost immediately admitted, and the heavy door barred behind him. Then a candle was lit, and by its uncertain ray two men confronted each other.

One, gray-haired, gray-bearded, his slight form bowed and bent as with the weight of many years, was Levi, the Jew. The other, tall, slender, seemingly of middle age and with the unmistakable features and complexion of a native born Mexican of the lower class, cast aside his cloak and sunk into the seat indicated by Levi.

"Well?" and the voice was remarkably clear and steady for one so aged and decrepit as the Jew seemed.

"I have come to report, as you bade me," was the prompt response, and the other drew back his hand as it was reaching out for the flask of liquor which stood upon the little table.

The keen-eyed Jew noticed this action, and said:

"Drink, if you feel the need of it, but remember that many a man has fitted a halter around his throat by pouring such devil's brew down it."

"I have eaten nothing since daylight, drank nothing since the noon before," was the apologetic response, as the Mexican poured out a generous draught, and swallowed it with eagerness.

"I can trust you, Pedro, and that is more than I can say of more than two other men in all the wide world! But, to business. You have succeeded in learning what I set you after?"

"Of that you must judge. I have done the best I could."

Humble enough the words and tone were, but the Jew seemed better pleased than if a louder boast had been made. He knew his man thoroughly.

"Good! Then my suspicions were right? The man I bade you shadow is really Raymon Salcedo?"

"He is only known in these parts as Theodore Freeman," was the cautious reply. "Late from South Carolina. Has plenty of money, and knows how to spend it, yet is not liked very well. Too proud and reserved, the miners say. Some hint that a bank suffered about the date on which he left the States to cross the range, but, when cornered, they can back up their opinion with nothing stronger than words."

"He is engaged to marry the daughter of Henry Martin, but the father seems anything but pleased. He has written back to the place Freeman says he came from, to learn more about his would-be son-in-law. The answers are expected by every mail."

The spy paused, as though he had concluded his report, and the eager Jew flashed forth in anger:

"I knew that much before I placed you on the track, Pedro Gonzales! Don't make me regret that I chose you for the work, instead of The Scorchers!"

"Bah! he is a bungler, when it comes to using wits, or anything more than knife or pistol," said the spy, his thin lip curling with disdain. "I have given you the report just as he would have delivered it. With him, there would have been nothing added. Now I will tell you what I discovered, by groping beneath the surface."

"This man who calls himself Theodore Freeman is really Raymon Salcedo, the cold-blooded villain who was the prime cause of the death of your—"

A low, threatening snarl from the lips of Levi, the Jew, caused the spy to cut short that sentence.

"No comments on the past. Give me the facts as you discovered them. You can swear that he is Raymon Salcedo?"

"And bring others who will swear to his identity, if that is necessary," was the prompt reply. "There are at least three persons besides us who know him for what he is."

"Their names? Who are they?" eagerly demanded the Jew.

"One is an old, greasy heretic, called Dirty Dick—"

"I know him," was the grim interjection. "Ten thousand deaths could not make him utter a word contrary to the will of his master, The others?"

"One is his wife—or so she believes. There was a ceremony of some sort, but when his testimony was needed, the priest was found to have died of a peculiar disease—a bit of lead in his brain, I believe."

"Go on—the next!" muttered Levi, the Jew, his black eyes glowing like living coals, his face flushed, great veins starting out on his temples, his sinewy hands tight clinched—the very personification of eager interest.

"A runaway husband, or lover, as the case may be, but who left a miniature edition of himself behind to console the deserted; a woman swearing vengeance following the recreant; an old man following her, lest his only child come to harm; so much I have learned concerning Theodore Freeman—or Raymon Salcedo."

"You are sure?" demanded the Jew, hoarsely.

"I knew old Manuel Sylva well, years ago. I have held the charming Lota on my knee many a time, when she was but a child. I knew them both the moment I laid eyes on them, though the girl failed to recognize me. I fear she is crazy, or fairly on the road to becoming such."

"You know where they are? You can find them when they are wanted?"

"Yes. I fancied you could make use of them, and so I took measures to keep old Manuel from finding Lota—"

"Your reasons?"

"The old fellow would whisk her away the very same hour he found her. I knew that would spoil a very interesting surprise for our friend Salcedo—"

"What do you mean? Curse you, man, come to the point!"

Fiercely the words were uttered, and as he spoke, Levi the Jew flashed forth a long knife, double-edged and sharp as a razor, thrusting its keen point deep into the soft wood of the table before him. A significant hint that the spy could not fail to comprehend, and he spoke, rapidly.

He had been a witness of the scene between the two women, on the evening of the meeting, and had overheard nearly every word that was spoken. When the deserted wife fled from Mrs. Martin, he followed and intercepted her.

"By revealing the past, and promising to aid her in the recovery of her lover, I gained her full confidence, and have placed her with one whom I can trust. She is there now, and you can either visit her, or I will bring her here, just as you may choose. Then you can see that I have told you nothing but the truth."

"If half-crazy, as you said, she may forget—she may slip away and disappear, just when she is most needed."

"Not from old Margarita, without a pass from me," was the ready response. "I fancied she would be needed, and so made sure that I could put my finger on her at any time and short notice."

"You spoke of the old man, her father."

"Yes, he is here, too, searching more for his child, though, than for the man who betrayed her. I stumbled across him this afternoon, by pure accident, and would not have recognized him then had he not spoken to me—he is so greatly altered for the worse since his daughter ran away."

"Still, he may encounter or be seen by Salcedo, who would take the alarm and steal away—"

"Not unless the harm is already done. I thought of that, and have old Sylva safe enough. It was not so easy, for the old rascal has been a famous drinker in his time, but he is half-blind, and I managed to double glasses on him, letting him drink for us both while telling the story of his child's misfortune. He is good for an all-night's sleep, and if you have any particular use for him, give me the order, and it will be carried out."

For a brief space there was silence between the two men. Levi the Jew was playing mechanically with the jeweled hilt of the knife which still quivered in the table. There was a strange fire in his dark eyes, and his lips seemed to be working convulsively beneath his heavy beard, while low, inarticulate growls, snarls and curses rose in his throat.

Pedro Gonzales watched his employer closely, though after a covert fashion which seemed to be second nature to him. It was plain that he was ill at ease, and scarcely knew whether to expect a blow or a favor in return for his services. Never before had he seen his chief—for no doubt the reader recognizes Joaquin Murieta beneath the disguise of Levi the Jew—in a mood similar to this.

"With a sudden effort Joaquin roused himself."

"You have done well, so far, Pedro. Be sure I will not forget your services. But you have more to report?"

"About?" hesitated the spy.

"The man who calls himself Jules Thibeau," quickly added the outlaw chief. "Parson Thi-

beau, as the Yankee devils call him. Surely you have not forgotten—"

"I forget nothing spoken by my chief," was the quick interposition. "You bade me shadow him—find out his past record, if possible—to turn him inside out, like a glove, so to speak. I have done the best I could, with that other business on my hands."

With trembling hands, Joaquin grasped the bottle, and without waiting to use a glass, drank long and deeply, like one who sorely felt the need of some powerful stimulant. Watchful, the spy eyed him, showing no outward signs of uneasiness, but really as uncomfortable as though in the den of a lightly sleeping tiger.

"Well?" demanded the disguised outlaw, "what have you discovered? He was at that meeting; he joined in the chase?"

"No. He is a man of peace, and only attended the meeting to aid with his wise counsels," laughed the spy. "He has been busy enough, after a secret fashion, though, and I think it can be proved that he is the man who has deposited one thousand dollars with Judge Mason, to be paid to whoever brings in the head of Joaquin."

"Not much like a minister of the gospel!" laughed the outlaw, harshly. "I thought I could not be mistaken, though he has succeeded in so completely altering his appearance."

"I never knew of a more thorough disguise, or of one who better played a double role!" declared the spy, in tones of admiration. "He is regarded a little below an angel by his congregation, and he has converted some of the toughest sinners on the Slope, since his revival began. He does not preach for a salary—nor would I, while the contributions pour out as heavily as his does! Better than a gold mine—and the parson owns a dozen or more of them, too, hiring them worked, and making them pay big."

"That he is no fool, one incident is enough to show. Just the contrary. By his orders, men dug a tunnel through the high ground bordering a branch of the Yuba, built a dam and turned the stream aside, laying the bed bare for nearly a mile, every foot of it being rich with pay dirt. His men each entered a claim, according to mining law, but he takes the whole profit, paying them wages instead. They only began work two weeks since, struck the first pick in the drained bed yesterday morning, yet the proceeds of that one day more than paid for digging the canal and building the dam!"

"I know," shortly said Joaquin. "I have seen the work. You found out something more than this?"

"Yes. The Parson has several other strings to his bow. 'The Old Kentucky Home' is one. Wouldn't his congregation be amazed if they could only know that their angelic pastor was sole owner of the biggest gambling hell in Marysville? Yet such is the case."

"Good!" and Joaquin smiled savagely. "If he is the man I think, I will know where to deal the first blow!"

"Six months ago, he run a similar establishment in San Francisco, on much the same plan, called the 'Wheel of Fortune'—"

The spy leaped to his feet and instinctively flung up an arm to ward off a blow, for with a snarling yell of fury, Joaquin plucked the knife from the table and brandished it above his head. Like lightning the blow fell—but not upon Pedro Gonzales. For half its length the glittering steel sunk into the soft pine, splitting the table from end to end, so terrible was the force of the blow.

The terror displayed by his spy, recalled Joaquin to his sober senses, and a hard, forced laugh came from his lips.

"Not you, good Pedro—gold for you, steel for him, when I have stripped him of all that such a man cares to live for."

"Then he is the man you wanted?" asked the still trembling spy.

"Yes—unless you are mistaken about his running the Wheel of Fortune in San Francisco."

Gonzales drew a long breath of relief.

"I am quite sure. There he was known as John Vanderslice. But that was not his real name. He came from Mexico, where he was born. His name is Manuel Camplido—"

"Enough! I know more of his past than you can tell. The devil has served him until now, but the end is close at hand! I'll wring his life from him, drop by drop! He shall suffer all the tortures of the damned—"

The outlaw chief stopped short, almost suffocating with fury. Pale and alarmed, the spy watched him, ready to flee if the terrible storm should threaten him. But the tempest subsided as quickly as it arose, and with a violent effort of will, Joaquin regained his wonted composure.

"Pedro, I will not try to thank you in words, or now. I know your weakness, and be sure you shall never lack the gold necessary to indulge it to the top of your bent! I could not have learned all this, with the hunt so hot for me, even if I possessed the patient craft so necessary to a spy, yet I would gladly give ten years of my life for this very information!"

"It is yours, captain, without price," was the prompt reply.

"I will not remain your debtor long. Are you too tired for more work this evening?"

"Not if you have anything for me to do."

"Are there many of the band in town, do you know?"

"A dozen, for certain; may be more."

"Good! We will wake up these sleepy Yankees before morning, and show them that the fun is not to be all on one side," replied the outlaw chief, with a hard laugh. "Go now, Pedro, and find all the men you know can be trusted. Bid them prepare for work; then return here."

Without a word the spy bowed and left the building.

Joaquin closed the door behind him, and secured it again, then resumed his seat at the table. His eyes flamed with a bright greenish light, and such of his face as showed through his heavy false beard seemed convulsed with a terrible passion. His voice was hoarse and choked with a deadly fury.

"At last! at last I see my way clear! Now I can begin to pay back the bitter blows these human-shaped demons dealt me and mine! Carmela—my poor, murdered wife! Carlos, my brother! The oath of vengeance I took in your names shall be kept to the very uttermost! Manuel Camplido first, then Raymon Salcedo! For every hair of your heads they shall suffer a death—yet still live on to suffer, even as I have suffered through their infernal arts! I was an honest man before they crossed my path. If there was blood upon my hands, it was shed in open, legal warfare. I did not drink; I knew not how to gamble; I would far sooner have died than slit a throat or lift a purse. Now—I am the demon they made me! Let them reap the benefit of their work. Through them I am an outlaw, with a price set on my head—I have murdered men—I have robbed others—I am going to the devil as fast as I can; but I'll not make the trip alone! This very night I'll strike my first blow for revenge on Manuel Camplido—curses on his head!"

CHAPTER V.

"THE OLD KENTUCKY HOME."

LESS than an hour from the time of his departure, the signal of the spy was again heard at the door, and opening it, Joaquin readmitted Pedro Gonzales.

"Well?" he uttered, asking the question more by looks than words.

"Better luck than I expected. I found eighteen of the men, ready and eager for work, no matter how hot it may be. I told them it would be lively business—not because I knew, for I don't, but—"

Joaquin broke in upon his speech with a short laugh.

"But you would like to know," he finished the sentence for the curious spy. "One thing—you told them no lie. There will be powder burnt, and blood spilled, unless I am widely out, but with the rest will be a good chance to finger the yellow dust that can buy all things save a reprieve from death. We will show these accursed Yankees that there are two sides to every game. They swear that there's nothing they are ready to pay higher for than a glimpse of Joaquin Murieta—by the cross! they shall see him this night, and pay high for the privilege, too!"

Pedro Gonzales listened eagerly while the outlaw chief was speaking, but an expression of disappointment crept over his thin face as Joaquin uttered the concluding words. Lucky for him that Joaquin knew him to the very core, and knew that this was but the overpowering curiosity that so peculiarly fitted him for a spy, else the strong interest he betrayed might have awakened suspicions as to his fidelity.

"Go back to the men," added the outlaw chief, speaking rapidly, "and bid them from me to rendezvous at the Old Kentucky Home, but to drop in after such a manner that there will be no notice attracted, or they be connected with what may follow."

"Then you mean—" hesitated the spy.

"To cut one of the strings to our good friend, the padre's bow. Just how, will depend mainly on circumstances. Go—give the men their orders. Be on hand yourself, and look out for my private signal. When you recognize me, pay attention to nothing else until I have showed you just how the work must be managed."

Though his burning curiosity was rather augmented than appeased, Gonzales bowed and withdrew to carry out his orders. Though he was closest in the outlaw's confidence, and knew more of his thoughts and schemes than any other living man, he knew too how dangerous was that distinction. Joaquin Murieta, in his new guise, was dangerous as a half-tamed tiger, and quite as uncertain in his outbursts. His transition from an honest man to a blood-stained outlaw had only deadened, not killed his heart nor his sense of honor, and to its awakening, at intervals, must be attributed many of the wild, reckless deeds that set all the Golden Land afire, the memories of which still linger about the scenes of his remarkable exploits. He hated himself and his own crimes

quite as intensely as any one of those whom he injured, and those who knew him best in those days have not hesitated to declare that the terrible wrongs which he was forced to endure must have unbalanced his brain.

"The Old Kentucky Home" was doing a rushing business on that fated night, as, indeed, had been the case almost from the hour when the hollow canvas sign, illuminated by oil-lamps, secured within its sides, first went up before the entrance. Times were flush. Everybody had gold, and each one seemed to vie with the others in striving to get "shoal on the bar" first. The name was a happy idea, and caught the American diggers "worse than the small-pox," as some one declared.

The building was large and substantial, for that era of cardboard structures, and almost every night, from dark till dawn, it was "so crowded that you could see the sides bulge out like a paper balloon!"

Such was the case on this occasion, when Joaquin Murieta, disguised in rough clothes and shaggy beard, entered the room. Faro seemed to be the favorite game, though a separate table was devoted to *monte*, the national pastime of the Mexican, another to *rouge et noir*, and still a third to a roulette wheel. Unlike the majority of gambling halls at that date and since, there were no facilities for those who preferred playing short cards away from the main crowd. He who ran this building, did so to put money into his own pocket.

Joaquin took a leisurely though covert view of the room and its many occupants, recognizing Gonzales and the majority of his men, but either the man he was searching for in particular was not there, or his disguise was a good one.

Since his troubles came upon him so thick and fast, Joaquin had learned to gamble, and the terrible fascination was steadily growing upon him. Even now, when about to risk his own life, and do a deed that would send his name all over the Golden Land, he could not resist the temptation with the sight of the cards, the heaps of glistening gold, and the encouraging cries of the smart, ill-favored *monte* dealer. Pressing forward to the table, he was soon lost to all but the weird fascination of the game, betting heavily, with luck just varying enough to keep him in the gambler's paradise—the half-way house between heaven and hell.

But Pedro Gonzales was on the alert. A born gambler, he had no money to indulge in the sport now, and that was all that kept Joaquin from forgetting the part he had come here to play. A tug at his sleeve aroused him, and turning impatiently, he saw the spy, his eyes glittering, his face full of important information.

The spell was broken. Waiting only to see his last wager decided against him, Joaquin turned away from the table and listened eagerly as Gonzales whispered:

"He is here—the Parson!"

"Sh!" hissed Joaquin, in warning. "No names. Disguised?"

Gonzales nodded, and following the direction of his eyes, he saw a tall, athletic form moving slowly through the room.

The size and shape corresponded to those of his old enemy, but the disguise, if such it was, of heavy wig and beard of iron-gray hair, was so admirably worn that he doubted whether he had caught the one meant by his spy.

"Go; when close behind him take off your hat and rub your head," hurriedly whispered the outlaw chief. "Set the Scorchers to watching him, then come back to me."

Gonzales obeyed, and Joaquin saw that the gray-bearded man was indeed the person indicated.

As the spy returned, Joaquin turned and left the room. Gonzales followed him, and when where there was no danger of being eaves-dropped, Murieta spoke again, as he did so removing a number of small parcels from his pockets.

"You are sure you have made no mistake? That man is the Parson—Manuel Camplido?"

"I'm willing to pledge my head on it," was the prompt reply.

Joaquin placed full confidence in the fellow's really remarkable acuteness, and felt no further doubt.

"Very well. When we leave that room, he must go with us—understand? Alive and unhurt if possible. Here is a pitch plaster. You know how to use it?"

"It has raised me a stake for the *monte* table more than once, when all other means failed," grinned Gonzales.

"Very good. Select two stout fellows to aid you, and keep within arm's length of your game, ready for the signal. Be careful not to arouse his suspicions, and be sure to take the right man at the signal."

"And that will be?"

"The putting out of the lights. You must detail men to attend to that—enough to cover all with darkness the very instant I give the signal, which will be my name. Make them understand that."

"Give these fire-bugs to the rest. Let those who hold them be as near the tables as possible, and when the lights go out let them play the

part of *croupiers*—rake in all the dust they can—then set the building afire at every corner."

Pedro Gonzales laughed merrily.

"Unless the wind dies away between now and then, Marysville will have the grandest illumination it ever saw!"

"Exactly what I intend," said Joaquin, with a savage intonation. "They have thrown down the gauntlet, and I mean to take it up. I will make this my first blow, but it shall not be the last, by many."

But little more was said, and then they returned to the Old Kentucky Home.

Joaquin sauntered leisurely toward the *monte* table, keeping an eye on the movements of his spy, who was rapidly carrying out the instructions given him, yet in such a quiet and adroit manner that it was next to impossible any suspicion could be aroused.

He could see that the Scorchers, a little, wizened Mexican, was keeping close to the heels of the man pointed out as "Parson Thi-beau," who was now moving toward one of the tables as if about to engage in play.

Joaquin noticed him closely, looking for some secret sign to pass between him and the dealer, but if such did pass, it was so guarded that even his keen eyes could not detect it. He frowned darkly and bit his lip until the red blood tinged his teeth, but even if Gonzales had made a mistake in his game, there could be no change in the programme now. All was ready for the blow—

Joaquin was on the point of giving the agreed upon signal, for he saw that Gonzales and his fellows were close beside and behind the quarry, that the "fire-bugs" were within ready reach of the banks, and the others of the band stationed where they could instantly extinguish the lights and plunge all into midnight darkness. His lips were parted, but they closed suddenly as he heard his own name mentioned in a loud tone by a herculean fellow standing near.

"The biggest heft o' you critters know me—old Jack Gabriel from the Washita flats! Hyar's my 'weasel-skin,' with jist twenty ounces o' dust into it. I'll give the hull for anybody to jist show me one glimpse o' this cursed Joe Quinn, Walk-in, or whatever his durned name mought be! An' ef I didn't swaller him, hide, boots an' all, I'd sell myself cheap for a cotton-nigger!"

The speaker was already well-known throughout the mines, from the many "turn-ups" which he had with men noted for their skill with weapons or fists, and was fated to be still better known before he was through with the man he now so boldly denounced.

The boast was uttered at an unlucky moment. Joaquin was nerved to a pitch of desperation such as few men ever achieve under any circumstances, and instantly accepted the challenge.

At a single bound he alighted upon the *monte* table, sending cards and golden stakes flying in every direction.

One hand held a cocked revolver, the other tore off his false beard and opened the breast of his shirt, laying his bosom bare as he cried:

"Plank down your dust! I am Joaquin—fire if you dare, Arkansas Jack!"

One fleeting instant, during which many and various were the changes. Arkansas Jack uttered a roar of mingled rage and amazement as he jerked forth his pistol and leaped forward. Joaquin fired one shot, which was rendered futile by the sudden movement on the part of Jack Gabriel.

Each one of the "fire-bugs" made an eager dive for the piles of gold which lay before the croupiers. Pedro Gonzales and his comrades pounced upon the gray-bearded man.

And the others of the band, the instant Joaquin pronounced his name, tore down the lights and extinguished them.

All was intense darkness. Yells, shouts, curses, trampling of feet and crashing of tables, all mingled in one wild tumult. There was a double rush—some for the doors and windows, others eager to secure a share of the golden pickings—and then, in the terrible excitement arose a shrill, piercing scream of agony, telling of a death wound inflicted by malice or accident.

It was the one spark upon the tinder. The densely packed mass seemed to go mad. Pistols cracked and lighted up the scene with sulphurous glare—knives grated against each other or met in quivering flesh—oaths and curses, yells of mad fury and shrieks of agony!

And then came another horror. Flames leaped up from every corner of the building, both inside and out, fanned by the gale to a fury that defied all mortal efforts. And high above all rung out a clear, sonorous voice, crying:

"Behold the work of Joaquin Murieta! First blow, but not the last!"

CHAPTER VI.

FACE TO FACE, AT LAST!

THE wild alarm spread like magic, and those few sober souls in Marysville who had retired for the night hurriedly sought the open air.

The cry of fire at midnight is terrible enough anywhere, but particularly so on the Pacific

Slope, where both water, and the means of applying it effectually, were scarce, and of little avail, when the flimsy character of the hastily-erected houses is taken into consideration.

And now there was a stiff gale blowing, aiding the efforts of the fire-bugs, who had carried out their orders to the very letter. Only a miracle could save the larger and better portion of Marysville from destruction.

The rest of Joaquin's men had done their work equally well. All had worked smoothly as he planned it.

Parson Thibeau was seized from behind, garroted, and the pitch plaster pressed firmly over his lips. There was one man to each arm, while Pedro Gonzales acted behind, managing the plaster, and steering the bewildered fellow toward the door as best he could.

Joaquin leaped to their assistance, barely leaving the *monte* table before it was crushed beneath the heavy boots of Arkansaw Jack. The darkness was only lighted up by the red glare of exploding pistols, but these came frequently enough for the outlaws. They showed them when and where to strike, and, acting in concert, they were among the first to leave the building by means of the door.

Only twice did they suffer any particular opposition. Then Thibeau was recognized by men in his employ, who also saw that he was a prisoner. Each time the outlaws triumphed—each time the obstacle was left behind, deaf, dumb and blind to all that was going on.

Just as they cleared the door of the gambling house, Joaquin clubbed his revolver and dealt the captive a deft blow upon the head. One short quiver of the strong limbs, then Parson Thibeau sunk a lifeless weight upon the hands of his captors.

"If questioned, say he was hurt in the rush—not a word if you can help it!" Joaquin muttered hurriedly in the ear of Pedro Gonzales. "Take him to the house, but don't let anybody see where you stop."

Already a crowd was gathering about the doomed building, which was now blazing furiously, while its living contents were pouring forth from door and windows. In that gale, even the most excitable never tried to save the house. Dry as tinder, built of pitchy boards, it flamed up with incredible rapidity.

A few moments of that eager interest with which one always regards a conflagration, when it is consuming other people's property—then a series of wild cries.

The fire was spreading! Three other buildings were ablaze—whether ignited by brands blown from the Old Kentucky Home, or by the fire-bugs, must remain an open question.

"Pray, men, pray!" screamed a shrill voice from the crowd. "Pray for the wind to go down, or the town is doomed!"

"Pray be durned!" thundered Arkansaw Jack, blistered and blackened, his garments still afire, for he had groped about in that hell of flame and heat until satisfied that Joaquin Murieta was either dead or had made his escape; then plunging through the fiery barrier, reaching open air just in time to hear the words of an over-excited digger. "The hull durned town'll go up while ye're prayin'! Ketch hold an' git to work—I'll eternally lick the critter that holds back now! Buckets hyar—now fight fire, durn ye!"

His example was contagious, and the entire crowd was quickly at work; but the fierce flames mocked their most desperate efforts. Steadily they spread, until even the most sanguine felt that Marysville was doomed!

Joaquin saw, heard, cared nothing for all this, after the first few moments of his clearing the blazing building, and giving Pedro Gonzales his final instructions.

Then he reached a point where the light did not yet penetrate, and muffling his lips with his hands, he cried:

"Men of Marysville, this is the work of Joaquin Murieta! You set out to hunt him from the face of the earth—he shows you that he knows how to strike back! This is the first blow, but not the last by many!"

The crowd stood aghast. Not one of them all could tell from which quarter those deep, sepulchral tones proceeded. Were they uttered by mortal lips, or—

Superstition was added to the other horrors of the night!

Joaquin had chosen time and place well for delivering his defiance, but it came near being fatal.

A man was hastening through the dark, narrow alley, and came almost upon Joaquin as he uttered those words.

With rage and vengeance in his heart, he leaped forward to take the audacious outlaw captive—better for him if he had yielded to his first impulse and sent a message of lead through the crouching form.

"Joaquin, or the devil, I have you now!" he grated, his sinewy fingers nerved to encircle the throat of the outlaw. "I'll serve ye out for killing—Oh!"

His foot slipped on a slimy, loose stone, his ankle turned, and he fell sprawling at the side of his intended captive. Joaquin heard his words, heard the sound of his leap; but for that

luckless slip, he would have been captured almost without a struggle.

As it was, he stooped—there came a swift glimmer of descending steel. A hollow, gasping cry, and Joaquin fled swiftly through the alley, leaving a corpse behind him.

All this had passed with the rapidity almost of thought, and the outlaw chief reached the low, stone building which he occupied as Levi, the Jew, some seconds before Pedro Gonzales and his comrades came up, bearing the senseless form of Parson Thibeau.

Joaquin flung the door open and helped them to hustle their burden inside, then dismissed them.

"Go and see the fun, if you choose, but remember a speedy death will await the one whom those cursed Yankees suspect of having a finger in the work. Be cautious. There is too much work ahead for me to lose many of the band now."

Pedro Gonzales cast a keen glance toward the fire, the roar and crackling of which now rose above even the wild tumult of excited voices, then said:

"It will eat its way against the wind, unless I am mistaken, and if so, you will be in danger here. Besides, there may be other fire-bugs in town, besides those we know of, and it is a common story that Levi, the Jew, has a dozen mule loads of gold dust and precious stones—"

Joaquin cut his speech short by an impatient wave of the hand.

"I can take care of myself. Go! there will be rich pickings yonder for those with cool brains and nimble fingers."

Nothing more was needed. Born thieves, the three men turned and rushed toward the growing conflagration.

Joaquin entered the stone building and closed the door behind him. A single glance showed him that the prisoner was still insensible from that deftly delivered blow.

One less versed in such matters would have been alarmed by the heavy, lifeless manner in which the Parson lay, but Joaquin knew that his captive was in no danger of dying from that blow.

It was no such fear that caused his face to grow a ghastly white and his hands to tremble as with the ague when he knelt beside that motionless form. He saw that the keen eyes of his spy had not been at fault. His man wore both wig and false beard.

Already loosened by the struggle, they came off at a touch, bringing the pitch plaster with them.

A low, snarling sound broke from the lips of the outlaw chief, as he bent low over the face thus left bare. A marvelous change had been wrought in it, but the eyes of hatred were wondrous keen, and Joaquin knew that at last he had met his bitterest enemy face to face!

Parson Thibeau—John Vanderslice—Don Manuel Camplido; all were one and the same person!

When he first knew him, as Don Manuel, he wore a heavy mustache and imperial; as John Vanderslice, the king of gamblers, in San Francisco, he wore his beard full, almost up to his eyes; as Parson Thibeau, his face was smooth shaved, his hair cropped close, and for one who had never seen aught of his facial features but his eyes, the alteration was most thorough.

"But I know you now, Don Manuel Camplido!" snarled Joaquin, his eyes fairly ablaze with mingled exultation and deadly hatred. "At last we meet—and when we part again, the mother who bore you would not recognize her spawn!"

With swift dexterity he bound the smaller man hand and foot, then propped him up in a chair near the table on which a lighted candle stood.

He hastily removed his beard and miner's garb, donning the costume of a Sonorian ranchero throughout. It was thus that he had first met Don Manuel Camplido, only a little younger, and with a few less lines in his face—the record of the terrible wrongs he had suffered since that day.*

His captive was still senseless, and eager to taste the vengeance he had sworn above the body of his murdered wife, Joaquin thrust back the head of the bound man, forced his jaws apart with the point of his knife, then poured a small quantity of a colorless, pungent smelling liquid, from a metal vial, down his throat.

The effect was almost instantaneous. With a cough and a sneeze, Parson Thibeau—to give him the name by which he was then best known—opened his eyes, a wild glare coming into them as he vainly strove to arise.

A dark, vindictive face was thrust almost against his, as a strong hand pushed him back into the chair—a face which he instantly recognized—a face that sent the blood back to his craven heart, leaving his countenance a sickly yellow.

"Joaquin Murieta—have mercy!" he gasped, great drops of sweat standing out upon his brow.

A hoarse, hollow laugh came in the bitterest mockery.

* See BEADLE'S DIME LIBRARY, Nos. 154 and 165.

"Mercy—yes! such mercy as your hell-hounds showed me on the Stanislaus! such as you showed *her*, my wife, Carmela! You did your best to murder me. You *did* murder *her*, after foully outraging *her*—"

He ceased abruptly, turning away from the chair, his fingers working convulsively at his own throat. He was afraid to trust himself longer. Another moment, and he knew that his death-gripe would have fastened itself upon the villain's throat—and he did not wish to kill him then, nor so easily as that.

During that brief struggle on the part of his enemy for composure, Parson Thibeau struggled desperately, but in silence, to burst his bonds. He knew what bitter cause this man had to hate him, and he felt that unless he could escape his doom was sealed.

Joaquin heard him, and his self-control was instantly restored. With a harsh laugh he turned around, more to be dreaded now in that state of frightful calm, than while in maddest rage.

"Strain away, my dear sir," he said mockingly. "When you grow weary of that amusement, I will try to furnish you with something a little more interesting."

In his terror the villain forgot that he had already betrayed himself, and with a factitious nerve lent him by the peril which threatened, he assumed a look of indignation, and exclaimed:

"Why have you treated me in this manner? If you think to extort money as ransom—"

"All the gold, added to every precious stone that ever saw the light of day, could not ransom you, Don Manuel Camplido!" coldly interposed Joaquin.

"My name is Jules Thibeau—I know no such person as you name," quickly cried the prisoner. "I knew there must be some terrible mistake—"

"So there was—in your not blowing your brains out before falling into my hands alive, dog! Bah! do you think to blind me? If an angel from heaven should come down here and swear that you are not Manuel Camplido, not John Vanderslice—I would brand the oath a lie!"

"I can prove my identity—"

"And so can I! It is branded here and here!" striking his forehead and breast. "You imprinted it there in letters of fire and blood, and I swore over the body of my murdered wife, to never know rest or peace until I had blotted the record out with the same agents. Until now, fate denied my prayer. I began to fear that the devil, your father, had cheated me, by calling you home before my work was done. But the vengeance will be all the sweeter from the long delay. At last you are *mine*!"

Again he turned away to conquer the devil that filled his heart almost to suffocation. Again the prisoner sought to burst his bonds, but in vain. Then, in hopes of being heard by some one who would come to his rescue, he inflated his lungs and gave vent to a loud scream.

Swift as light Joaquin wheeled and leaped upon him, his sinewy fingers closing about the prisoner's throat and cutting short the cry—closing more tightly until Parson Thibeau grew purple in the face with the terrible pressure.

Just short of suffocation Joaquin released his victim. He quickly fashioned a rude but effectual gag, and ere the Parson could gain breath or struggle enough to resist, it was thrust between his jaws and bound in place.

"Blame yourself if I am rude," said Joaquin, with a smile of satanic mockery. "Those voices you hear are of the men who are trying to save the Old Kentucky Home from ruins. It would be a pity to call them from the task. Who knows? The place may belong to some poor devil, and the loss of it ruin him forever! If you were one of the ungodly, instead of the holy Parson Thibeau, I would ask the owner's name; but of course *you* know nothing about such an unregenerated sinner!"

The prisoner writhed in his bonds. Already he felt the keen sting of this man's vengeance. Even then he was losing a fortune by fire, and gold was the only god he owned.

Joaquin turned aside and produced a small brazier, filled with charcoal, which he proceeded to light as it sat on the table between them. While working, he talked:

"You say you are not Don Manuel Camplido or John Vanderslice. Of course, then, you know nothing of their past history. Just to pass away the time, while this brazier is heating, let me give you a brief sketch of the past."

"Don Manuel and a poor *vaquero* lad were living in Mexico, something less than two years ago. They both fell in love with the same girl—Carmela Felix, her name."

"Don Manuel was rich; owned several estates, and more stock than he could count in a year. But he had received the brand of coward. He was given a company of lancers, in the war with the United States. When he first came in sight of the enemy, he fled without a blow being struck on either side. Only his high connections saved him from death. He was cashiered and dismissed from the army."

"Carmela Felix came of a long race of Span-

ish soldiers. It was impossible to keep such a scandalous story secret, and still more impossible for her to love such a craven. Instead, she loved the poor herdsman.

"Don Manuel swore revenge. He hired men to play the part of Apache Indians, waylaid Carmela and her father while on a journey, murdered the one and abducted the other. But the herdsboy followed and foiled him, rescuing the girl and taking the ravisher captive.

"The young couple were married, by the father's death-bed, and at the same hour Don Manuel escaped, never more to reappear under that name.

"He turned up in San Francisco as John Vanderslice, an American gambler. Fate brought the young couple to the same city, and they were marked for ruin and destruction by the gambler.

"It is too long a story to tell all that he plotted and schemed. The result will be sufficient.

"Repeatedly foiled, he at length found his victims peacefully digging gold on the Stanislaus river. He collected a gang of ruffians only less brutal and devilish than himself, and dealt the blow he had so long meditated.

"The husband fought long and hard, but at length was laid out by a blow from behind, and beaten until all thought he was dead. The wife tried to aid him. Instead, she fell alive into the hands of that merciless devil.

"You can imagine what she suffered. I dare not trust my lips to repeat what she told me, after they had left, and as she lay dying in my arms. Enough that she recognized him as the leader—as the one who felled me senseless from behind, and the one who first assaulted her."

More and more husky grew the speaker's voice as he briefly outlined this sickening tragedy, then ceased, unable to speak more.

Only for a few moments. Then his wonderful nerve once more gained the ascendancy, and his voice, though low, was smooth and clear as he added:

"I was that herdsman, Carmela was my wife, and you the hell-hound that murdered her. I swore a solemn oath of vengeance then. I mean to keep it now. I struck the first blow to-night. My men set fire to your gambling-hell, and robbed your banks. This same night will witness the destruction of every bit of property owned by you in Marysville. Next will go your mining property; the dam first. After that—well, you shall see!"

As he spoke, Joaquin drew his knife and thrust it into the mass of charcoal which filled the brazier, now all aglow.

A low, mocking laugh came as he saw the eyes of the prisoner following his movements with horror and fear.

"You are my property now, dog, and I never omit putting my private mark upon all such. Should you run away, or stray again, I can easily find you by the description."

While speaking, he turned the blade over and over, heating it alike from hilt to point, only ceasing when the weapon was of a bright cherry red. Then he drew it forth, and stepped before the trembling captive.

Grasping an ear, before Parson Thibeau could divine his horrible purpose, he severed the member close to the head, at a single stroke!

The red-hot blade seared the flesh, sending out a sickening stench of roasting flesh and blood.

The pain must have been horrible indeed, but for one moment the prisoner sat motionless as a stone statue. Then, with one superhuman effort, he burst his bonds—the gag flew from his jaws, and with a frenzied bowl he flung himself upon his torturer. Wrapped in each other's arms, the bitter enemies rolled over the floor, snarling like wild beasts!

CHAPTER VII.

"REVENGE IS SWEET!"

FIERCE, desperate and unrelenting was that struggle. Like well-matched bulldogs they fought—like them also, in silence they contended for the mastery which meant all the difference between life and death.

Over and over the floor, their limbs closely intertwined, their breath coming hot and heavy, exerting every nerve and muscle to the utmost, bringing into play every ounce of strength, now one on top, now the other, yet neither able to improve the momentary advantage thus gained before it was wrested from him and the situation reversed.

From the very first it resolved itself into a question of brute strength and endurance. Parson Thibeau had no weapons save those furnished him by nature. Joaquin meant to capture, not kill, his hated enemy.

Here and there they rolled, bringing up against the table at length, with such force that the candle was knocked off and the brazier upset on the floor, the glowing coals scattering about.

Joaquin saw this, and from that moment his efforts were turned in that direction. Again and again did their closely entwined forms near the smoking coals, only to roll back as the Parson struggled blindly, madly. He did not divine the purpose of his enemy. It was mere chance that led him to frustrate the intentions of his

antagonist, and the same chance that at length led to its success.

Joaquin felt the scorching coals first, but not a sound betrayed the fact as he struggled to turn his adversary. One superhuman effort that might have cost him dear had it failed of its purpose—and then a shriek of agony burst from the lips of Parson Thibeau as the glowing coals ate through his clothes and seared his flesh in a score of different spots.

Like nearly all cowards at heart, he was especially sensitive to pain, and as those lumps of fire stuck to his quivering flesh like leeches, he forgot that he was fighting for life, forgot all else in his mad haste to escape from those scorpion tongues.

Joaquin realized his chance and as quickly improved it. With both hands free, he grasped the Parson by the throat and flung all his powers into that deadly gripe. Warned of his fatal mistake, the villain fought desperately, but all in vain. That terrible gripe was rapidly weakening him. It grew closer, more inexorable. His brain whirled round and round, while a dull roaring filled his ears. A blood-red mist, filled with myriads of flashing, dancing stars—then his brain yielded.

For a few moments more his struggles continued, but they were purely mechanical. The end could not long be delayed while that terrible gripe was fastened upon his throat. Joaquin felt the hard-strained muscles relax, felt the quivering flesh grow quiet, and knew that the victory was won. He immediately released the throat of his enemy, knowing that this sudden yielding was no feint, for the coals of fire were still scorching his flesh, and the Parson was not stoic enough to endure that exquisite pain, even on the chance of gaining life by throwing his victor off guard.

Joaquin did not realize how desperate that struggle had been, until he essayed to lift the body of his enemy from the coals. He could not raise it—could barely manage to roll it over and brush away the clinging charcoal with his hands. Then he sunk down beside the Parson, his brain whirling dizzily, every nerve and muscle in a convulsive quiver, feeling sick and faint.

Only for an instant. Then, by a vigorous exercise of will he arose and found a flask of liquor. A long draught, and he was more like his usual self.

Once more he bound his victim hand and foot, this time doubling the thongs so that they would have held a mad grizzly bear. Then he raised the body in his arms and placed it once more in the chair beside the table.

By this time little tongues of flame were springing up from where the lumps of charcoal lay upon the floor, threatening to add to the conflagration which was still raging without, but Joaquin quickly extinguished them, then turned once more to his prisoner.

Parson Thibeau was just recovering his consciousness from that terrible throttling, and a groan of utter despair broke from his lips as he recognized the young Sonorian. It all came back to him in that moment. He knew that he was doomed to worse than death.

A low, mocking laugh from the outlaw chief.

"No more lies—no more hollow pretenses, Don Manuel Camplido! You know me now, as well as I do you. You have had a foretaste of the punishment which is in store—a mere drop in the bucket—"

"Mercy!" groaned the miserable wretch, the last trace of manhood vanishing before that remorseless, relentless voice. "Spare me! I was mad—drunk—I did not know what I was doing at the time—"

Again that cold, blood-chilling laugh.

"No doubt. I don't believe you fully realize it even yet. But you will before the end comes. Yes! I think I may safely say that much."

Parson Thibeau closed his eyes with a shudder of horror. This was no man that confronted him. Instead, a merciless, heartless demon of vengeance!

He had taken a horse-hair lasso from where it hung on a peg driven into the wall, and was trying the noose, seeing that it worked free and easily. Satisfied on this point, he flung it over a stout beam just over the spot where the prisoner sat, and then slipped the noose over his head, drawing it snugly about his throat.

Parson Thibeau shrunk away from his touch as if from contact with a venomous serpent.

"Merciful Mother! you will not hang me? Give me time to repent! I am not fit to die! Have mercy—"

Joaquin struck his lips lightly with the palm of his hand.

"Speak only when you are spoken to, dog! Hang you? Not yet. That would be too brief and painless a death. I am simply contriving a new sort of gag, for use in case you try to attract much attention of the neighbors. Not that there is much danger of your succeeding!" he added, with a hard laugh after a moment's intent listening. "They have their hands full, out yonder. In punishing you, I am striking hundreds of others—but what matter? They are accursed Yankees—of the same race with those who hung my brother and flogged me!

Not content with that, they have sworn to hunt me down to death. They threw down the gauntlet, and I picked it up. We'll see who can deal the worst and hardest blows!"

From outside came the wild chorus of excited voices, of roaring flames and falling roofs. And added to these, came the smothered explosions of powder. The desperate citizens were trying to save a remnant of their town by blowing up buildings and clearing a space across which the devouring flames could not leap!

Parson Thibeau closed his eyes with a hollow groan of despair. He knew now that there was little or no hope of aid for him from without. Even if heard, his cries for help would be unheeded while that terrible conflagration raged.

Joaquin put more coal in the brazier, and placed his knife across the top as he fanned the stuff into a blaze.

In one hand he held the slack of the lasso. With a single jerk he could cut short any outcry his prisoner might attempt to make.

"I had not quite finished when you cut me short awhile ago," he said, speaking in the low, gentle tone which had formed one of his greatest charms in the days gone by. "Still, I will not harrow up your feelings by dwelling upon the past. You well know of what crimes against me and mine you have been guilty. You know that I have taken an oath to avenge those wrongs; but you cannot even guess just how I mean to repay the debt."

"Listen!" he exclaimed, as the tumult without grew louder. "Ere this your other gambling-bells have followed after the Old Kentucky Home! The gold they contained you will never see or hear of again. What my men have not secured has been stolen by others. A fortune has left you, but there is much remaining that fire cannot touch. So you think."

"Water will destroy the most important of all your enterprises. Lead and steel will clear away the others. Or I may take a notion to run them myself, by proxy. No doubt a little judicious persuasion will induce you to sign them over to such deputies as I may choose—"

"You can kill me, but I'll never do that!" growled the Parson, nerved to desperation by these taunts.

"Yes, I can kill you, and I mean to do so. But not all at once. You shall first suffer a death for every hair of her head! First your possessions—then your members. Your gambling-bells are gone—so has one ear. The other shall follow as soon as this blade is sufficiently hot to sear the wound and keep you from losing too much blood. I do not wish to reduce your strength too suddenly. You must be strong enough to suffer death upon death, yet still live to suffer fresh torments!"

As he spoke the avenger took the red-hot knife from the coals, but he did not use it immediately. With a yell of horror, Parson Thibeau strove to burst his bonds, but quick as thought the young Sonorian flung his weight upon the lasso, drawing the noose tight about the throat of his captive, cutting short both scream and struggle, fairly raising the doomed wretch clear off his chair.

Only a moment thus; then the rope was slackened, and the Parson sunk back into his chair, trembling, all unnerved.

With a laugh that was fairly frightful in its merciless malignity, Joaquin set his foot on the end of the still taut lasso, then bent across the table, knife in hand. A single motion and the deed was done.

Parson Thibeau was earless!

A scream of agony burst from the tortured wretch, but Joaquin leaned back on the lasso and again stifled the sound ere it was more than fairly born. His eyes were ablaze. His face seemed that of a veritable fiend. For the time being he was no better than a madman.

A sadder sight was never seen than this woe-filled transformation of an honest, gentle, lovable youth into a merciless, bloodthirsty demon of vengeance!

Once more Joaquin replaced the knife across the glowing coals and resumed his seat, gloating over the agony which his helpless victim was suffering.

The heated iron had seared over the severed blood-vessels, so that there was but little hemorrhage. Stranger than ever looked Parson Thibeau now, with smooth shorn face, close cropped hair, and only hideous scars where his prominent ears had been!

"It is your turn to suffer now, dog and son of a dog," said the avenger, with a soft, mellow laugh which formed a startling contrast to his words. "But this is nothing to that which I have in store for you. This is like heaven compared to the hell which awaits you! Day after day I will visit you. Each day you shall die, yet live on to suffer anew. You, and such as you, made me a devil. I mean to show that I can out-devil you all before the end!"

"One more little touch, just to finish making my private mark. One never knows what may happen in days like these. It is barely possible that you may escape me again, and try to hide from my vengeance beneath another disguise. To guard against this, I am marking you so that you can never hope to change your identity beyond recognition. The loss of your

ears forms part of that mark. In addition, I mean to burn the sign of the cross upon your forehead."

"Mercy—spare me—I am dying!" gasped the mutilated wretch in feeble tones; but the pitiless avenger only laughed.

"As you spared my wife—the same degree of mercy you showed her! Bah! it sickens me to hear you whine so cravenly. If I stay much longer, I'll be tempted to kill you as too contemptible a creature even to torture!"

"Listen! you hear those sounds? They are growing stronger. It is possible that the fire may work against the teeth of the gale, and seize this building. If so, you will perish with it. And if you are wise, you will pray for that fate to befall both it and you. The pang may be a little more severe, but it will soon be over, while my vengeance will last for days—weeks—months!"

"If not—if you escape the fire—if I am not killed—you will see and feel me again tomorrow. If I die, you will starve to death, for not a living soul besides myself, knows aught of the pit where I mean to stow you away. You can shriek aloud until you split your throat, and nobody can hear you—even though your dearest friends stood in this very room, ready to give their lives to ransom yours!"

He grasped the heated knife, and holding the head of the helpless victim against the back of the chair, cut the sign of the cross upon his high forehead, the flesh shriveling and shrinking away from the searing steel, leaving the white bone bare!

One gasping cry—then silence. Parson Thi-beau had fainted.

Showing his teeth in a smile of devilish glee, Joaquin drew back and viewed his dread handiwork for a moment. Then he raised a cunningly contrived trap-door, and slipping the noose of the lasso around the body of his victim, lowered him down into the gloomy pit. He followed after, remaining absent for a brief space, then returned, closed the trap-door, changed his clothes and left the building securely locked behind him.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BLOW FALLS.

THE twilight was gone, the full moon was just showing its face above the tree-tops, when a horseman rode at reckless speed up to the entrance to the stable yards of the Martin ranch. His clear, cheery hail was unnecessary, for at the sound of hoof-strokes, the two men who called Henry Martin "boss," came hastily forth, more eager for news than work, however.

The wildest rumors flew about on the wings of the wind. One of the least monstrous was to the effect that Joaquin Murieta, the vile author of all these murders and crimes, had led an army of merciless cutthroats against Marysville, burning every building in it and massacring the inhabitants, regardless of sex or age.

One other besides the hired hands heard that rapid approach, and Lura Martin, white faced and trembling with strong emotion, stood near the open door, gazing out upon the man whom she loved so deeply—ay! loved still, loved even more passionately now that she believed he was forever lost to her through worthlessness, through his own sins, than when she thought him all that was good and true and manly.

This was the third evening since their parting, he to attend that meeting which ended so strangely, she to be confronted by the half-crazed Spanish woman who claimed Theodore Freeman as her husband, Raymon Salcedo.

Only once had Lura seen him since that parting, and then only for a moment, in the presence of a score of other men who had taken horse to hunt down the audacious outlaw, Joaquin Murieta. On the night before the present one, the party of man-hunters intended stopping for a few hours of much needed rest at the Martin ranch, as they returned from their blind search, but ere they reached their goal, they saw the broad red glare of blazing buildings painted on the sky above Marysville, and forgetting all else, they sped to town to save their all, or aid their neighbors.

Thus a combination of circumstances had kept Lura and Theodore from having an explanation. Nor had Lota Sylva returned as she promised. Only for that groaning, sickening pain at her heart, Lura Martin might almost have fancied that terrible scene but part of a nightmare dream.

Theodore Freeman wasted little time on the hired men, telling them that the firebugs had not yet been discovered for certain, though a number of persons had been arrested on suspicion. That one-half of the town was in ruins; that several bodies were found, while the number of missing was placed still higher, but that there had been no massacre, no fighting of any moment.

Entering into the house, he almost ran into the arms of the maiden ere he saw her. He caught her to his breast, either in ignorance of or unheeding her faint struggles, and kissed her repeatedly.

He heaved a long-drawn sigh—a very breath of relief as he drew her to a seat on the lounge beside him.

"Ah! this is heaven after—the other place!" he exclaimed, one arm asserting the true lovely privilege. "Three days of rough riding after will-o'-the-wisps and fire-fighting—Why, Lura! you are not ill? you have not been sick?"

With a caressing gesture he had put one hand beneath her chin to raise her face to his own, and by the faint ray of moonlight which filtered in through the open window, he saw that she was as pale as a corpse.

There was such a depth of tenderness in his tone, so much of anxious love in his lustrous eyes, that poor Lura was tried beyond her power of endurance. With a struggle lent by desperation, she tore herself free from his arms, and fled from the room, leaving him speechless, stupefied.

"What the mischief's broke loose now, I wonder?" he at length muttered, rising to his feet with the intention of going in search of his fugitive love.

He was spared the trouble. Lura re-entered the room, bearing a lighted candle. More than ever he was startled at the utter change which had come over that bright young face since he saw it last. Not only deathly pale, but wan and worn as though from a long and dangerous illness.

With an astonished, pained cry he started forward, but the maiden recoiled from his approach, motioning him back with her unoccupied hand.

Mechanically he obeyed, a dark flush deepening the bronze upon his cheeks; a flush very near akin to anger.

Lura saw this and read it aright, but she did not falter. She dare not. She knew his fatal magnetism too well. If she were to yield ever so little, she felt that she was lost.

This fear rendered her voice colder and harder than she knew or intended.

"Not yet, Mr. Freeman. Keep your distance, if you please, unless you wish me to ask mother to take a part in this interview."

The young man stared at her in mute amazement that under less serious circumstances would have been supremely ludicrous. Either he was completely surprised, or else he was a most finished actor—poor Lura believed it was the latter!

Pale as a ghost, to hide her trembling, she sunk into a chair which stood on the opposite side of the table.

Stung to the quick by her cutting tone, Theodore Freeman hesitated for a moment, then dropped heavily into a seat.

Silence was more than Lura could bear, and she spoke:

"You saw father at town, Mr. Freeman?"

A short nod was the only response. Tired and jaded in both body and mind, having scarcely closed his eyes for three days and nights, the young man was not in a condition to cheerfully accept a bluff such as this which he felt that his betrothed had put upon him.

"You know then, of course, whether he had received those letters from the South?" calmly pursued the maiden.

"He had not," was the slow response, and Lura saw that the speaker turned pale, while a strange light seemed to come into his eyes at her question. "It is strange—very strange!" added Freeman, thoughtfully. "They should have been here long ago. They must have miscarried—I can account for the delay on no other basis."

"You are sure?" asked Lura, with strong emphasis on the last word, her cheeks flushing, her eyes beginning to gleam.

With an exclamation of surprise, Freeman arose from his chair and moved toward her. Instantly the maiden was upon her feet, one hand raised in warning.

"Keep your distance, sir, or I will summon aid—"

"What the—what on earth do you mean, Lura?" he said.

"What do I mean? You can ask that question! Well, sir, I will answer it. I mean that you are known here in your real colors at last. That your name is not Theodore Freeman, but Raymon Salcedo. That you are a native of California, instead of coming from the States. That your life while here has been a lie from first to last—"

The picture of stupefied amazement, the young man stood before this avalanche of hot, indignantly spoken words for a moment, without motion or speech; but then a harsh, forced laugh cut the maiden short.

"Will you please tell me where the laugh comes in, my dear?" he asked, with a poorly counterfeited lightness. "For the life of me, I cannot see the point to your jest—for jest it must be. You surely cannot believe the terrible charges you are making!"

A cutting laugh greeted the conclusion of his speech.

"And those letters, so long overdue! Shall I tell you why I think they have not arrived? Because *your wife* has intercepted them!"

That was the last feather. Swift as a panther in his motions, Theodore Freeman gained her side, grasped her hands in both of his before she could take a retreating step.

His glowing black eyes looked down into hers,

keenly, searchingly, as though they would read her very soul. His handsome face was pale as that of a corpse. His voice was stern, but held well under control, as he spoke rapidly:

"Lura, you have said too much, or too little, to let this matter end now. You are not mad, as I at first feared, so you must have some reason for speaking to me as you have. What are those reasons? It is my right to know on what grounds you call me a traitor, cheat and perjurer."

It was truly a bitter ordeal for the young girl, but her blood was fairly up, and her powers were equal to the task.

"Release my hands, or I will call for help," she said, coldly.

In silence he obeyed, standing before her, his pale face more like that of a martyr than a guilty wretch. So she thought, but she smothered the pang, and spoke again:

"Can you swear that you are what you told us? Can you swear that you are not Raymon Salcedo—that you did not marry a poor girl named Lota Sylva, in Lower California, and then cruelly desert her?"

"I can swear to all that," was the steady response. "I will swear to it, if ever the need arises, but I will not stoop to do so, even for your sake, unless you can satisfy me that you have good grounds for suspecting me of such baseness."

Her heart told Lura that this was not the tone, nor these the words of a guilty wretch. But then she recalled that painful interview with the half-crazed Spanish woman. There had been no counterfeiting there, and she crushed down her heart, as she had been doing ever since he came.

"You remember when you left me, three days ago? You had scarcely gone—nay, even as you rode away she tried to attract your attention—"

Theodore Freeman started violently, as though the memory of that dark figure had just returned to his mind.

"I remember, my horse was frightened at something, but I did not recognize it as human. You said *she*—whom do you mean by that?"

"Lota Sylva, your wife—"

"I have no wife—I never had one," he interposed.

"The woman who claims you as her husband, then. She told me all; how she was wooed, won, wedded and then deserted. How she finally recovered from the shock sufficiently to steal away from her father and search for you—I mean for her husband. She traced him here, she saw you, and if ever woman spoke the truth, then she believed that she did in claiming you for her husband!"

"And you believed her! You, who have repeatedly said that you loved me as never woman loved before, listened to a stranger and believed all she said against your betrothed husband, without waiting to hear *his* side of the story! If *that* be woman's love, then a man is an idiot for straining every nerve to win it! It is not worth the trouble!"

Bitter the words, still more bitter the tones. Lura staggered back as though his clinched fist had fallen upon her. A low, gasping cry parted her lips, and she would have fallen to the floor, but for his quick leap and supporting arms.

His lips were pressed passionately upon hers. She struggled faintly to escape, but his arms only held her the more closely.

"Forgive me, darling!" he cried, tenderly, remorsefully. "I was a brute to speak so harshly, but it was not without provocation. Your doubting my truth, when Heaven knows that I would sooner lose you forever than win a wife by fraud so cruel, so devilish as that! I could not bear it in silence. The words burst from me before I could check them, or even realize what I was saying. But you do not—you cannot believe all that of me?"

"Do you think I did not struggle against the conviction that she spoke the truth? Do you think it was no pain—"

She could say no more. Her fictitious strength forsook her, and she lay helplessly in his arms, sobbing, trembling.

Tenderly he bore her to the lounge and devoted himself to restoring her composure, by those little acts which all lovers are conversant with. At length he succeeded. Lura sat up, tearful, but far more happy than she had been since that last parting. Gently Theodore questioned her, until she had told him all that she could remember.

"And she has never returned, though she promised to do so?" he said, with a light laugh.

"Surely that was enough to open your eyes, my foolish little doubter! And, too, you thought her crazy. More, she admitted having been so once, at least. She could never have been wholly cured. No purely sane woman would claim another's lover as her husband—least of all, a crooked stick like me!"

Lura joined in his laugh, but only faintly. Despite herself, she still doubted, and he saw as much. A light frown contracted his brows, and was banished instantly.

"It is a matter that can easily be settled, once for all," he added, in a confident tone.

"From your description, I think I would recognize the woman, and I will set about hunting her up to-morrow—"

"No need to take so much trouble—she is here now!"

The lovers started to their feet, one with a bitter cry, the other with something that sounded suspiciously like an oath.

Before them stood the Spanish woman, whiter, more wan than when Lura saw her last. Her bare arm was extended toward the young man with an appealing gesture; only one—the other clasped a bundle to her bosom.

"Who are you?" demanded Freeman, sternly, his face white as marble, his heavy brows fairly meeting in an angry frown. "How dare you intrude—"

"Raymon—my husband—forgive me!" murmured the woman, sinking upon her knees through weakness. "I could do no less when I heard your voice—when I saw you embracing and lavishing kisses upon that woman—and I—have pity, husband!"

As she spoke, Lura tore herself away from the arm which still encircled her waist, all her doubt returning. Freeman felt this, and an angry cry escaped his lips. He took one step forward, his clinched fist elevated as though he would silence those pleading lips with a coward's blow—but his arm was caught by Lura, who stood between them, her eyes flashing.

"For shame! Strike a woman—and she your wife!"

The man staggered back. A blow in the face from the heaviest fist could not have more effectually disarmed him than did that swift speech. Only a few words, but each one was like a double-edged dagger piercing his heart!

Poor Lura received scanty thanks for her generous interference. With an angry cry, Lota Sylva arose and pushed her violently aside, her eyes gleaming like those of an enraged tigress.

"Begone! you have wrought enough harm. You have stolen his love from me, but you shall not abuse him while I live!"

Another swift change. She turned to the stunned, bewildered man, holding in her outstretched hands a handsome boy—even then the perfect image in miniature of the man she addressed—whose great black eyes wore a look of mingled wonder and affright.

"See, Raymon—husband! Our little babe pleads my cause!"

"Pa-pa!" softly crowed the youngster, then turned away from the man and buried his face in his mother's bosom.

"It is because he was asleep when I came in," cried the poor woman, with a pitiful smile as she soothed the babe. He will not be so shy when he is fairly awake. He will love you, then, and—"

She paused abruptly as the man strode forward and grasped her arm, turning so that the candle light fell full upon his face, still white as death, but with eyes that blazed redly. His voice was harsh and stern as he spoke:

"Look close—look well before you speak. Now—am I the man you say? Am I your husband? Tell the truth, as you hope for mercy here and salvation in the life to come!"

"Did I ever tell you a lie, Raymon?" cried the woman, pain in her voice, but no trace of doubt such as he hoped for. "Could I mistake you for another? You, my god—my all!"

Her hand was flung aside with an angry snarl. A gasping cry came from poor Lura, that told her last hope had fled.

"My God! am I going mad?" gasped Freeman, clasping his forehead with both hands, his eyes wildly staring. "You are no wife of mine! I was never married—I never even laid eyes on you before you came in here like an evil ghost! You lie when you say that I am your husband. It is all a foul conspiracy—"

Not one of them heard the sounds of rapidly-thudding hoofs approaching the door. Not one of them heard or saw the red-faced, angry-looking man who entered the room just as Theodore Freeman spoke those words.

"Just what I say, young man—a most damnable conspiracy!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE STORY HENRY MARTIN HEARD.

"TELL the women-folks I'll hardly be able to get back home to-night—business on hand—but not to worry."

The speaker was Henry Martin, and he addressed Theodore Freeman, who had impatiently reined in his horse as he was hailed by his prospective father-in-law. While speaking, the ranchero steadied himself by holding to one knee of the rider, while his other hand grasped the long mane of the spirited horse. His breath was thoroughly scented with liquor, his usually pale countenance red and bloated.

The young man promised, then rode on, his face filled with exultation, his eyes aglow, as he muttered:

"No danger of an interruption from him, then! He's in for another big drunk. If it don't wind him up for good and all, he must have been born with a marvelously strong constitution! To think of a drunken sot like that, with such a family—such a fortune—"

It was sad, as no one more fully realized than poor Henry Martin himself. But the demon of drink would not be denied, and when he felt himself yielding, the ranchero's first instinct was to hide himself from the eyes of his family.

For an unusually long time, he had fought off the craving for a "regular drunk," and this negative victory over his relentless enemy greatly encouraged both him and his wife, for they knew only too well that each debauch was cutting shorter the remnant of life which stood to his credit.

Only for that unlucky meeting over which he was chosen to preside, perhaps all might have gone well.

As a leading spirit, and one of the wealthiest in that section, when the meeting was so strangely adjourned, Henry Martin felt called upon to do all that lay in his power to avenge the insult and punish the insulter.

He furnished horses and arms to all who cared to claim them for the purpose of hunting down Joaquin Murieta, and even hired others at high wages to scour the hills and valleys for the audacious outlaw. He would have headed a force himself, for he did not lack the courage or will—only the bodily strength. And never before did he so acutely feel the shame of being a pitiful drunkard.

It was this feeling which at length broke down his resolution and drove him to drink heavily again. It was well that he could not penetrate the future and divine what fatal results were to come of that yielding to the tempter, else he might have blown his brains out with his own pistol.

Theodore Freeman had hardly vanished from view along the road leading to the Martin ranch, when a white-haired and bearded man, bowed and feeble, way-worn and travel-stained, bobbled over to where Henry Martin stood, and placed a trembling hand upon his arm.

"A thousand pardons, senor," he said, his voice weak and husky, as he bowed his uncovered head. "Believe me, I would not intrude upon your privacy, only—"

The drink-dimmed eyes of the ranchero saw only a ragged beggar standing before him, hat in hand. Always generous, liquor made him lavish, and instantly his hand was extended, his palm covered with gold pieces.

"Help yourself, my good fellow," he said, a little thickly. "Take what you need, and don't be afraid of dipping in too heavily. God forbid that any of my fellow-creatures should suffer while I have plenty. Eh? What?" he stammered, as the man pushed back his generous hand.

"I am no beggar, senor," was the proud reply, and the stranger drew his broad form erect while his dark eyes flushed with a resentful light from beneath their heavy, snow-white brows. "I ask charity of no man, even though I were starving for want of a meal. But I have money—gold enough to more than outlast my days—"

"I beg your pardon—I didn't think—in fact I am not quite well, this evening," stammered the ranchero, flushing hotly and shrinking from the proud old man.

"Nay, senor, it is I who should apologize," gently added the stranger. "Truly, I do look like a beggar, and little wonder that you should make the mistake of supposing me one, but when the heart is filled with bitter grief and despair, it leaves little room for thinking of the body."

"If I can serve you in any way, pray command me," said Martin, still uncomfortable.

"If it is not asking too much—you know the man from whom you but now parted—the horseman?"

The dark eyes were filled with a strange light, with a fire so intense that the ranchero involuntarily fell back a pace. But quickly smothering the strange dread, he said:

"You mean Theodore Freeman—"

"Is that the name he gives now? Surely—bah! I cannot be mistaken! It was he—ten thousand curses rest upon his head! The traitor—liar—assassin!" snarled the old man, his face fairly convulsed, his voice harsh and strained—his eyes filled with hatred the most intense.

Henry Martin was almost completely sobered by the shock. From the very first he had suspected that Theodore Freeman was not just what he claimed to be, though his closest search had thus far failed to find anything which could be regarded as positive proof. Knowing as he did that only the clearest evidence could wean the heart of his idolized daughter from its allegiance, it is not to be wondered at that he eagerly grasped at this seeming chance of solving the mystery.

"Come—we are attracting too much attention here in the street," he muttered, noting the curious glances which several men were casting toward them, no doubt because of the excited tones of the old man. "If you can give me any positive information concerning that man, I will remain your debtor for life!"

"Where shall we go? I am a stranger here—"

"To my office—come!" and the ranchero led the way past the burnt district, entering a small

building, closing and locking the door behind him.

Striking a match, he lit a candle which he placed upon the table, then motioned to a chair.

"Sit down and tell me all you know concerning Theodore Freeman—"

"I never even heard the name until you spoke it," was the quick interposition.

"But you said—you seemed to recognize him!"

"The man, not the name, senor. When I knew him, he was not called by that title. But pardon and bear with me, senor. I have been very ill. I am still weak. I have not ate or drank for—weeks it seems to me; how long I do not know. I will be stronger soon—"

Before he was done speaking, Henry Martin had produced a bottle and glasses, then said:

"I'll run out and find you something to eat—"

"No, this will give me strength enough for the present. Your health, senor!" and the stranger eagerly gulped down the liquor his trembling hands poured out.

The ranchero joined him, for he, too, felt the need of a stimulant. His shattered nerves were all a quiver, but he could no longer restrain his impatience.

"You can talk now? If you know aught of Theo—of that man, be his name what it may, I pray you tell me all! The honor and happiness of an angel may depend upon it!"

A harsh, discordant laugh greeted this excited speech.

"So you have a daughter, on whose charms this devil—this serpent in human form—has cast his fascinating toils? Mary Mother grant that I may be in time to save her—to spare you from the shame, the bitter grief and ruin which has fallen upon me and mine! One lovely victim would not suffice him—"

Henry Martin leaned across the table, and grasping the raving old man by the shoulder, shaking him violently, as he cried in hoarse, strained tones:

"Speak out! In one word, who and what is this man?"

"A liar, villain, assassin, and the lawful husband of my only child, Lota Sylva!" came the startling response.

The ranchero fell back into his chair, pale, trembling, gasping as though he was dying. Swiftly the stranger poured out a glass of brandy and held it to his lips. At one gulp it disappeared, and nerved anew by the poison, Henry Martin slowly regained his color.

"You can prove this? Remember it is a terrible charge you are making, and you had but a passing glimpse of the man you accuse, and that in the gray twilight. Where so much is at stake, we cannot be too cautious."

A bitter laugh broke from the white bearded lips.

"Just so I reasoned when he came to us. I doubted his handsome face and plausible manners, but I would not hearken to the counsel of reason. He was a stranger, ill and in need of help. I was afraid of wronging him, even in thought. So I was cautious where I should have been prompt—blind where I should have looked most closely—and what was the result? Ruin and desolation! My daughter wedded, yet no wife—the mother of a child who had no father! A harmless, holy priest was murdered so that he could not bear evidence of the marriage. My child gone crazy, and I—covered with shame and remorse! And all that the fruit of over-caution lest I wrong a man who might be all he claimed—but who was all that is evil—a veritable fiend in human guise!"

Swiftly the words fell from his lips, rendered ten-fold more bitter by the tone in which they were spoken. It was a true story he was telling, and the ranchero could not help believing his words. Still, there might be some mistake. While the story was true, what proof was there that Theodore Freeman was the man?

A true lawyer, he could not help asking himself that question. He thought, too, of his idolized daughter, whose whole soul was bound up in this man. Were he to be proved the villain this stranger said, it would go very near to killing the poor, deceived girl!

"I will act prompt enough when once I am satisfied that we are on the right track," he said, more calmly. "But you are a stranger to me, while he is betrothed to my only daughter. To prove him a villain, I fear will kill her—"

"Better death now than such an awakening as will surely come to her sooner or later! False to one—false to another! Never a fairer child drew breath of life than my poor Lota—never purer soul, never holier love than that which she lavished upon that demon! Yet he deserted her—and worse! He put it out of her power to ever clear her fair fame by proving herself a lawful wife. And how, think you? By the basest sacrilege! By murdering the priest who wedded them! And this is the man of whose feelings you are so careful? Bah! you are no man—no father! Only that I have sworn bitter vengeance upon him, old, half-blind and feeble as I am, I would leave you to suffer all I have suffered—leave that hell-bound to ruin your child even as he ruined mine."

"Listen. Surely you have not understood

me, or you would not be sitting here, while that demon may even now be leading your child to ruin, just as he lured away my daughter.

"I told you how he came, how we nursed him back from the very threshold of the grave, how he wooed, won and then deserted my child when his vile passions were satiated. But I did not tell you how she pined for his return, how my suspicions were aroused until I extorted the whole black truth from her, nor how she went crazy when we found the only man who could have cleared her name, dead—a bullet through his brain!

"I could not leave her alone in that state. Besides, where was I to look for him? We only knew the name he had given—that of Raymon Salcedo. Even that might be false, like all the rest. I could do nothing—only wait and pray for the vengeance of Heaven to fall upon his head!

"Then the baby came—and I cursed it again and again, for it was *his* child. Lota recovered her reason, but the past was an utter blank. I was glad that this was so. I was growing old and feeble, I was not fit to start out on a long and blind quest that might last for years, if death did not overtake me before then. We had no inquisitive neighbors to rake up the past.

"But one day a party of gold-hunters came to my ranch, and in an evil hour I questioned them about Raymon Salcedo. One of them knew him. He lived up here, and was very rich, his family high and noble.

"She must have overheard us talking, or why should she flee from the only refuge she knew, on that night of storm? For she was gone when day dawned, leaving no word or token for me. We searched the hills and valley, we dragged the river, but found no sign. Days and weeks passed on, and still she did not return as I hoped. I could endure that horrible life no longer. I abandoned everything, and set out to find Raymon Salcedo. Where he was, Lota would be, unless she was dead. If dead, there was still vengeance to spur me on.

"I found his home, but he was not there. Still the journey was not utterly vain, though they refused to tell me where he might be found, for I learned that a woman with a child had been making the same inquiries. It was Lota. She still lived, and I must find her—find her before she meets *him*, or he would add another foul murder to his black record!"

The old man paused, utterly exhausted by the fierce vehemence with which he had spoken. With breathless interest Henry Martin had listened, his heart sinking lower and lower as the last vestige of doubt was being swept away.

"You found her? She can corroborate your story?" he demanded. "Bring her with you, and we will confront the scoundrel and force the whole truth from his lips! If he be the man you say, he shall acknowledge your child as his wife—shall wed her over again to silence every doubt—or I will have him strung up by the neck like a sheep-killing cow—ay! even if I have to play the part of hangman myself!"

"No, I have not found her," was the sad response. "I fear she has come across his path, and if so, she may be dead. I traced *him* here, I found that he was paying court to your daughter, though I failed to meet him or even catch a glimpse of him until this evening—"

"It was a glimpse—some fancied resemblance—"

The old man drew a small miniature painted on ivory from his pocket and placed it before Henry Martin.

"It is he—Theodore Freeman!" cried the ranchero, after one swift glance. "Where did you get it?"

"It is the likeness of Raymon Salcedo. I stole it from his house, when I was there—" began the old man, but the ranchero did not pause to hear more.

With a wild, hoarse curse of vengeance, he opened the door and rushed to the stable where his horse stood. In ten seconds he was in the saddle and riding like a madman along the road leading to his ranch.

CHAPTER X.

DRIVEN TO DESPERATION.

"AY! a most damnable conspiracy!" repeated Henry Martin as the young man turned upon him. "You played your cards well, but you've lost now. Pull out—levant—leave this house and never show your lying face here again, or by the heavens above! I'll blow a hole through you so big that all eternity can't close it!"

With a man to face, Theodore Freeman quickly rallied:

"Good! I can talk to *you*, even if you are as crazy as the rest of them!" he said, in a more natural tone, though there was a savage echo in his voice that should have warned the ranchero of danger.

"You've talked too much—you can say nothing but what will make the matter worse. There's the door! Take your leave before I wholly lose control of my temper, or by the Lord of Israel! you'll make me do murder!"

Theodore Freeman paid no attention to the fierce threat, though he must have seen that

the ranchero had one hand on a revolver, refraining from drawing it only by a violent exertion of his naturally strong will.

As Martin's rage grew less controllable, the young man became more calm and self-possessed.

"Of course you are master in your own house, Mr. Martin, but at the same time other people have rights which should be respected quite as much as yours. Am I to be baited and bullied like this, yet not be permitted to utter a word in self-defense? Lura, here—"

An angry cry from the ranchero cut him short.

"Curse you! Keep your foul tongue away from her name!"

"It is the name of my promised wife," boldly retorted the young man, his magnetic eyes flashing, his face flushing warmly. "She, and she alone, has the right to forbid my using her name in that connection—though, after what has transpired this evening, I could hardly be surprised at anything she might say or do!"

"What it all means, I'll be cursed if I can even guess! First, Lura repulses me, acting and talking as though her brain had given way—then this woman appears with a monstrous claim, false as hell itself! And now *you*—ha!" he exclaimed, a savage light coming into his eyes. "By the heavens above us! I believe that's the solution!" You are at the bottom of it all, Henry Martin! You never liked me—from the very first you have done all you could to ruin my chances with your daughter! You failed—you saw that her heart was mine, in spite of your pitiful plotting—and as a last desperate hope, you hired this creature to come here and assert this wild claim—a claim false as sin, and black as the heart of the man who concocted it!"

Swift and passionate came the words. They struck home none the less keenly because they were wholly unfounded. Henry Martin lost all control of his temper, and his pistol was jerked from its scabbard and leveled.

"Shoot, you coward!" cried the young man, never flinching, though the frowning muzzle was scarcely a yard from his heart.

Shoot the ranchero did, but the lead was wasted on the ceiling above him, for Lota Sylva, swift and active as a panther who sees her young threatened, struck up his pistol hand. The next instant her keen dagger flashed forth from her bosom, and quivered above the heart of the ranchero.

But swifter still was the action of Theodore Freeman.

He grasped her uplifted hand, and twisted it so violently that the weapon was hurled flashing across the room, and then a strong jerk sent the woman after it.

A sharp cry escaped her lips as she fell, but it was not the pain of body that wrung it from her. Even he who handled her so roughly could not help feeling that.

Lura sprung between the two men, her arms flung around the neck of her father, her white face turned appealingly toward Freeman. An inner door was flung open, and Mrs. Martin entered, alarmed by the pistol report and loud voices. But Theodore Freeman heeded neither of these, addressing the ranchero in clear, stern tones:

"You have called me hard names—have indirectly accused me of foul treachery. Now you must explain yourself. With what do you charge me? In what have I sinned against you and yours—"

Henry Martin strove to speak, but only a hoarse, inarticulate cry escaped his parched lips. His face was turning purple—his breath came in painful gasps. He sought to raise his pistol again, but the weapon dropped from his nerveless fingers upon the floor.

"Go! for the love of heaven, leave us!" cried Mrs. Martin, her arms inclosing the swaying form of her husband. "If you remain, it will be murder! Don't you see that your presence is killing him? Go—or the curse of a widowed mother rest upon your head!"

What could he do? Nothing but obey. And snatching up his hat, Theodore Freeman rushed from the house.

A gasping, surging cry, then the heavy form of the ranchero sunk to the floor despite the loving arms which encircled him. Foaming, frothing at the mouth, his strong teeth grating and grinding together, his face livid, swollen and frightfully distorted, his limbs twisting and quivering, his head rolling violently from side to side: in brief, all the frightful phenomena of an epileptic fit.

Fortunately for the sufferer, both Mrs. Martin and Lura knew just what to do to relieve him, and under their judicious treatment, Henry Martin soon recovered his consciousness, though still weak and unsteady.

Through it all, the Spanish woman crouched in the corner where she had been flung by the hand of the man whose right or wrong, she believed was her recreant husband, mechanically soothing the wails of her child, who had received a severe shock in the fall.

The state of coma which usually followed one of these epileptic attacks, did not fall upon the ranchero on this occasion. Possibly his brain

was too excited by the terrible discovery he had made, but be that as it may, he was soon himself again, to all outward appearance.

Casting aside his wife and daughter, he caught up his pistol and glared savagely around the room in search of Theodore Freeman. An angry oath escaped him as he realized the truth.

"The cowardly rascal has fled—and well for him! But he shall not escape! I will follow him to the ends of the earth but what I'll avenge the bitter insult he has put upon us—the lying, treacherous cur!"

A low, anguished moan from poor Lura caused him to turn toward her. His stern-set countenance relaxed, and a pitying light came into his eyes as he dropped the revolver and opened his arms.

Lura fell upon his breast, sobbing as if her heart was broken. His trembling hand caressed her golden hair, and his voice was strangely soft and compassionate as he spoke:

"My poor little birdie—God knows how deeply I feel for you in this! The blow falls most heavily upon you, the most innocent of all. I know how hard it must be—I know how deeply, how completely you loved him—heaven's bitterest curses upon his head!"

"No, father—don't!" she cried, her voice broken by bitter tears. "Don't curse him! I loved him so dearly—God pity me! I fear I love him still!"

"Don't say that, pet," hoarsely uttered the ranchero. "You must tear out all such feeling—you must learn to forget that he ever lived—if you could only learn to curse him as I do, it would be all the better.

"See what the foul villain has done, and what he has tried to do. He married a poor girl, then deserted her and her child, murdering the only one who could clearly prove his marriage! Then he comes here, and plays the role of an honest man. He imposes on us all, by lies as black as his own vile heart. He teaches you to love him, and but for the suspicions which, thank Heaven! I could not smother, hard as I tried to do so, for your sake, darling—but for those suspicions, you would now be his victim, even more to be pitied than that poor creature yonder, for she was honestly wedded to the scoundrel!"

"For what he has done, and for what he tried to do, I say again and again—curse him! For that, I swear to have vengeance! I'll hunt him down and show him as little mercy as I would a mad-dog! I'll kill him—"

With a sharp cry, Lota Sylva leaped to her feet, leaving her babe upon the floor, wailing bitterly. Her black eyes were flashing, her face was that of a fury.

"Kill him, and I'll kill you!" she cried, her voice hard and strained. "Ay! lift as much as a finger against him in anger, and I'll be your death! Remember, it is *my* husband of whom you are speaking. Of how he treated me you have no right to speak. He is my master, as well as husband. He had the right to do even more than that. As for her—baby-face! She was to blame, not him! No doubt she lured him on, and by her cunning arts made him forget me for a time, or she used some foul magic, gave him some powerful potion—"

She abruptly broke off, for the first time noticing the whining of her child. Snatching him up from the floor, she recovered her dagger, and holding the glittering weapon up before the face of the ranchero, she uttered a final warning in swift, deadly tones:

"Dare to harm him, my husband, and true as there is a heaven above us, I will hunt you down—ay! even though you flee to the furthest corner of the earth—and bury this blade to its hilt in your heart!"

Then, before a word could be spoken or a hand lifted to check her, the half-crazed woman fled from the room.

She paid no attention to their calls, only by fleeing the faster. She had only one wish—to find her husband. He might curse her, might beat her to his feet, even as it seemed he would have done but for the prompt interference and cutting rebuke of Lura Martin: he might even go so far in his mad rage as to kill her for exposing him before the maiden whom he was seeking to make his wife; but the deserted wife gave no thought to that. She only longed to find him, to fall at his feet and plead her cause, with that helpless babe to aid her. Surely he could not deny her, when once away from that fair-faced, fair-haired sorceress!

Find him she did, poor woman! and sooner than she dared hope. A dark form leaped out from the shadows, and a strong hand grasped her by the shoulder.

Driven to desperation by the complete overthrow of his dearest hopes, Theodore Freeman had fled from the house, but not to go far. He must meet this woman who had claimed him as her husband, and force a retraction from her lips, or—

Even in his half-insane state did he dare to finish the sentence! If so, human ears never heard it.

"I've got you now!" he snarled, his face in the clear moonlight which fell upon the road showing convulsed and almost repulsive, such was the burning rage that filled his heart.

"Who hired you to tell that black lie? Who is at the bottom of this damnable plot to ruin me and dash my brightest hopes to the ground? Speak, or—"

"Raymon—my husband!" faltered the woman, but she said no more, for that strong grasp tightened upon her shoulder until it seemed as though his finger-ends would fairly meet in the flesh, and then shook her so violently that her teeth rattled together.

"The truth—no more lies!" he growled, forcing her along toward the dense growth of timber, where the telltale moonlight could not penetrate.

"Raymon, you frighten me!" the poor creature managed to gasp. "You will hurt the child—"

"Curse the child—curse you!" was the savage response, and though the gloom hid his face from her, she knew that it was convulsed with rage, but his words roused the mother-love in her bosom, and she said, spiritedly:

"Curse me, if you will, but not him, not our little Ray. He is innocent of wrong-doing. He has sinned against neither you nor me. On! husband—"

"What! still that foul lie? Woman, you have ruined my every hope in life! Another word and I'll lay you dead at my feet!"

Then the fiery Spanish blood asserted itself, though still tempered by a love such as few men can inspire, such as few women are enabled to feel—luckily for them!

There was no more shrinking—no more trembling. Her voice was clear and steady as she made reply:

"While I live, I must speak, and even if your heart is so changed that the truth cuts it to the core, yet I will still plead my cause—nay, the cause of our son! Only for him, I would have died long ago. But for him, I would say no more, now that I have found you, only to find that the old love has vanished, never to return. I would die at your feet—my own hand driving the steel home to my heart—and die without a groan to distress you, or cause you remorse in the days to come. And dying thus, I would still breathe forth my love—a love that even death cannot destroy."

Her words were full of pathos, but her tone was even more pathetic. Even he could not listen unmoved as the pleading woman knelt at his feet, the whimpering babe raised toward him. He turned away as if to flee, but the motion wrought a sudden and complete change in her.

She sprang to her feet and in tears caught him by the arm.

"Raymon, I fear that my brain is giving way! Do not drive me too far—for your sake, and that of your child. Forget that yellow-haired witch—"

It was a luckless allusion. An angry curse broke from his lips as the words brought back a full sense of all that he had lost.

"Enough of this," he said, hoarsely. "I am not Raymon Salcedo. I am not your husband, nor the father of that yelling brat. I never saw you in my life before you entered yonder building and perjured yourself by making that preposterous claim on me."

"There is only one reparation you can make for the monstrous wrong you have helped to heap upon me. Acknowledge your falsehood—go back to the house with me and tell them the truth—"

"I told them the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth!" she declared, her voice clear and resolute.

"Beware!" he snarled, fairly beside himself. "The devil is whispering to me now. Don't drive me too far, or—"

He did not finish the sentence, but there was no need. That hiatus spoke even more clearly than words. Lota Sylva understood him, but she did not yield, did not shrink away.

"You are my husband. I may never be able to prove it against your will; but I never will brand myself a liar and outcast even at your command. You may kill me—"

There was a scuffle—a stifled scream from a woman's throat—the frightened wail of a babe—then all was still!

CHAPTER XI.

RIDING TO HIS FATE.

"THAT villain will murder her, sure as fate!" exclaimed Henry Martin, starting forward as Lota Sylva fled from the house. "If she overtakes him now, I wouldn't give a copper for her life!"

"So be it, then," and there was an unwonted sternness in the wife's voice, as she clung to her husband and kept him from leaving the room. "You shall not go, husband. He would kill you, rather than her."

The ranchero yielded, but it was from bodily weakness rather than personal fear or aught which his wife said. He still suffered from the effects of his epileptic fit, and sunk back upon the lounge, faint and trembling.

"There was the very devil in his face—Heaven shield the poor woman, should they meet again while his rage is hot! I would have kept her here—would have treated her as kindly as my own child—"

"Not with my consent," flashed Mrs. Martin, her quiet, phlegmatic nature thoroughly aroused. "As soon harbor a rattlesnake or a panther! Look how she turned on you, when you were defending her, when you were taking her part against that monster—"

"Her husband, remember, mother," and the ranchero smiled faintly, speedily growing more like his usual self. "That covers a multitude of sins, as none should know better than yourself—"

His lips were stopped by a quick kiss, for the woman understood his meaning only too well. And she knew what was the invariable ending to those spells of remorseful remembrance—a prolonged debauch which surely curtailed the already brief lease of life which he held.

At all hazards, she must keep him from thinking too much of himself and the revived past.

A heavy sob from poor Lura effected a diversion.

"Poor child—poor little pet!" huskily muttered the ranchero, drawing her closer to him and gently smoothing her tangled hair as it lay across his breast. "God knows, I would give my life to keep all such suffering from you; but since the heavy blow had to fall at some time, better now than when eternally too late! If he had gained his evil ends—if she had not come until after he had gone through with the mockery of marrying you—the shock would have been even more dreadful. Now, with our help, darling, you will live it down. The scar may long remain, but there is much of happiness yet in store for you. We will help you to forget that such an evil, treacherous serpent ever crossed your path."

No reply from the maiden, save that her tears flowed more freely. But Mrs. Martin dare not let the silence continue, and though she knew that every word was as a knife-stab to her child, just then, she said:

"You are sure then, husband, that the story that creature told was a true one? It does not seem possible that we could be so terribly deceived in that man. I loved him as though he was my own flesh and blood!"

"Thank Heaven, I never did! From the very first I suspected and disliked him—"

"Yes—and for that reason I asked you," hesitated the wife. "I know that you would not knowingly wrong your bitterest enemy, husband; but—might you not have been mistaken? There is no doubt? He is that creature's husband?"

"You heard her assert her claim—"

"Yes; but that is no proof. A creature like that would not hesitate even at a bolder lie, if there was any end she hoped to gain by it."

Clearly Mrs. Martin had not fallen overwhelmingly in love with Lota Sylva.

Henry Martin had been too long married to make any allusion to this. Instead, he rapidly repeated the story told him by the old, white-bearded Mexican, Manuel Sylva. And as the two women listened, their hearts sunk like lead, their last faint hope was banished, for in every detail the two narratives corresponded.

"He was telling nothing but the truth," the ranchero added. "In every word, in every tone I could read it. For a time the terrible revelation stunned me. I listened like a man under the influence of a horrible nightmare, until it suddenly flashed upon me that he had come here. I cannot tell how I parted from the old man. I remembered nothing more until I found myself here, listening to his voice—and then I rushed in and confronted the scoundrel."

For a moment there was silence, unbroken even by the sobs of the terribly stricken girl. Then Henry Martin spoke again, addressing his wife:

"I fear you have been concealing something from me—"

"If so, it was for my sake, father," cried Lura, suddenly arising. "It was in answer to my pleading. Tell him, mother."

"She—that creature—came here the other night, when you were at the meeting in town. She told us the same story which you have repeated but now. She saw Theodore when he bade Lura good-by, and declared that he was her husband, Raymon Salcedo. We thought her crazy, and tried to keep her here, but she tore away from us just as she did to-night, though not until she promised to return on the next evening, when we expected both you and—and he would be here."

"She seemed terribly in earnest, yet her words and actions were so strange that both I and Lura believed her insane, and the story she told an empty delusion. We decided to wait and see if she kept her promise of returning. This was more easy to do, since you were not at home all that night nor the next day, and even when you did come, there was no chance to speak a word in private with you."

"The woman did not return, until this evening. I was lying down with the children, when I heard a pistol-shot, and came down-stairs to find you all together."

Henry Martin was satisfied, the more so that the story told by Lota Sylva fully corroborated that of the old man. There could no longer be any doubt—and so poor Lura felt, for she arose

to her feet, her voice remarkably clear and firm:

"She spoke the truth—I know it now, though it did not seem possible, at first, that I could have been so utterly deceived in—in him. It was a pleasant dream while it lasted, but it is gone now—dead and buried past all resurrection. Never mention his name to me again. I—I hate him—I loathe and despise his very memory!"

Stooping, the poor girl pressed her cold lips to her father's forehead, then abruptly left the room.

Henry Martin dashed a tear from his eyes, and muttered a deep, bitter curse against the villain who had wrought all this sorrow and desolation.

"But I'm proud of her—prouder than ever, mother!" he said, warmly. "She looked like a queen as she said that. I am glad she is going to take it so easy. I was sadly afraid she would be completely crushed by the blow."

The mother was far from being so near satisfied. She looked beneath the surface, and felt that this strange, unnatural calm could not last long. The reaction must come, and then the struggle would be all the more severe.

The ranchero read this dread in her pale countenance, and looked the question he dared not ask.

"No—I don't believe her brain will give way," was the low response, "but I fear that there is more trouble yet to come. The poor child fairly worshiped him. She expected to become his wife ere long. You know her nature—with her it is all or nothing. It will be like tearing her heart out by the roots to banish her love for him!"

"But she will do it!" exclaimed the ranchero.

"Yes, she will do it, but only at the price of terrible suffering. I fear to leave her alone, but—"

"Go to her, mother. You will know better how to soothe her than I. Go to her—poor little child!"

Impulsively the wife flung her arms about his neck, and kissed him. Knowing her so long and well, he read her fears, and the color deepened in his face.

"You will not go out again, husband?" she murmured. "You will stay at home? Do not give that villain a chance to bring more sorrow under our roof-tree—and he will, if you two meet now, when the passions of both are so hot!"

"Go to Lura, wife," he said, "I will be with you inside of an hour. I have something to tell the hands. You can trust me."

Without a word, she kissed him again, then left the room.

Henry Martin picked up a hat, and stepped out doors. At that moment he had no thought of breaking his word, no idea of leaving the place, but feeling faint and weak, he turned back and poured himself out a large drink of brandy. The instant it passed his lips, he regretted the act, for he knew from sad experience what the result would be. This last drink, added to those he had mechanically swallowed while listening to the story told by Manuel Sylva, set his brain on fire, and he knew that he could no more check himself now, than a swimmer could stem the current at Niagara.

With the same blind instinct which leads a dog in the first stage of madness to slink away from those it loves best, and hide in darkness, Henry Martin felt that he must flee from his loved ones, to conceal his shameful weakness.

He hastened to the stables, where his horse which he abandoned at the door, had been taken and cared for. At his approach the two hired men came out, with poorly disguised curiosity written upon their rugged faces. They had heard the pistol-shot at the house, and had stolen near enough to witness the termination of the strange scene; had seen first Theodore Freeman leave the house, then the woman in the black cloak, and longed to know more of the queer affair, though neither of them dared question their employer.

"Saddle Golden Girl. I am going to town," briefly uttered the ranchero, fearing to betray his condition.

The bay mare was quickly equipped and led forth. But before mounting, the ranchero added:

"I expect to return in an hour or so. But it is barely possible that I may be detained all night in town, as I have very pressing business to attend to there. While I am gone, keep your eyes and ears open. I think I can trust you, boys?"

"Tain't fer us to say that, boss," quietly responded Dick Hebron. "We've bin with you nigh onto three years, now, an' I can't remember our ever playin' you dirt yet."

"I know—I chose my words poorly," quickly answered the ranchero. "I know that I can trust you as I would myself, but my brain is quite upset by what has happened. You must have heard the disturbance at the house?"

The two men interchanged glances, then nodded.

"Yes, Van an' me run over thar, to lend a hand, ef it should be needed; but when we saw it was'n't we come away."

"It is a painful story, and too long to tell now, but that villain—he who called himself Theodore Freeman—turns out to be a base impostor, and worse—"

"Tain't Joaquin, the p'izen critter they're all talkin' so much about?" eagerly asked Hebron. "No—but not much better, I care say, if the whole truth was known," bitterly replied the ranchero. "It is to put you on guard against him that I stopped. Keep a close lookout. If he comes skulking back here, take him prisoner if you can. If he offers resistance, or tries to escape, shoot him down like a mad dog! I'll be your surety against harm for the act."

"Durned ef we don't do it, boss!" eagerly cried Hebron. "I never did favor the high-toned critter—"

"Same here!" chimed in Van Riley, less talkative, but quite as emphatic in his likes and dislikes.

"He may not come back—it is hardly likely that he will—but if he does, capture him if you can do so without too much risk to yourselves. He is quick on trigger, and will be in a dangerous mood. Kill him rather than let him escape."

Nerved by the liquor he had swallowed, Henry Martin leaped into the saddle with something of his old ease and strength.

He rode slowly away from the stables, keeping as much as possible in the shadows, for fear lest his wife should hear the sounds of Golden Girl's hoofs, and try to recall him.

He knew that he must have drunk—must swallow the poison without stint until his senses were lost in drunkenness. Without it, he felt that he would go mad. Not even her presence could shame him from a debauch now, and he still possessed manhood enough to shrink from so utterly degrading himself before her very eyes.

Down the road and past the clump of timbers where Theodore Freeman and Lota Sylva, bearing her baby boy, had been swallowed by the darkness. No sound came from the black depths—no noise of deadly struggle, of cruel blow—no scream of women, no wailing of terrified infant. All was still as death.

For a mile more he rode on, then abruptly drew rein, an angry cry parting his lips as he glared at a tall form standing just within the line of moonlight bordering the road. The form, the face of Theodore Freeman!

In an instant the fierce passion born of the bitter wrong done his idolized daughter, flamed up anew in the breast of the ranchero, and leaning forward in his saddle, he demanded:

"Is that you, Theodore Freeman, skulking here on my land?"

"It is a public road, free to all," shortly muttered the man. "Ride on, old man—don't crowd me too far! Only for your white hairs, and being half crazy besides, I would pay you back for the insults you showered upon me, back there. If you are wise, ride on, and don't tempt me to do you an injury!"

With a hoarse, angry cry, the ranchero urged his horse toward the man, his heavy riding whip uplifted.

"Curse you! I'll flog you as I would an egg-sucking cur!"

He said no more. Swift as thought an arm went up—there was a blinding flash—a heavy fall upon the hard ground!

Golden Girl bounded aside with a snort of terror, but ere she could flee, the noose of a lasso settled around her throat.

CHAPTER XII.

THE "BLOOD-DRINKERS" AT WORK.

IT WAS only a few minutes after Henry Martin left the house that his anxious wife came down-stairs to rejoin him, fearing to leave him longer alone lest that terrible temptation should overpower his shattered nerve, and lead him to take the rash step which, as has been shown, he actually had taken.

He was not in the house, but that she expected, after what he said about speaking to the hired hands. She went to the door—and saw the phantom-like shape of a horseman gliding through the shadows, heard the low trample of iron-shod hoofs upon the hard ground, steadily growing fainter.

Only those who have had a similar experience, can even faintly imagine the bitter agony which filled the wife's heart as reason told her that the figure of which she had caught only a shadowy glimpse, was her husband, breaking his pledge to her, and stealing away like a thief in the night.

Not only was it the bitter shame which she felt, but she remembered what the doctor, an old, confidential friend, had told her while attending to the ranchero after his last drinking bout. Another such would be almost equivalent to deliberate suicide. If he should recover his consciousness after a drunken stupor, which was extremely unlikely, it would be only as an idiot.

"He has not gone—he promised, and never yet has he broken his word to me!" murmured the half-distracted wife, turning from the door with a sudden thought. "If he has not touched that, I have made a fool of myself for waiting. If he has—"

She never finished the sentence in audible tones. She saw the brandy bottle and glass, in the bottom of which still stood a drop or two of the amber poison. She knew that her worst fears were confirmed, and with a bitter groan, she sunk into a chair, covering her face with her hands, sobbing as though her heart would break.

Not for long. Phlegmatic and easy-going under ordinary circumstances, she had all the qualifications of a true heroine when an emergency arose to call them forth, as the stern events of that same night were fated to bear witness.

Smothering her grief and drying her eyes, Mrs. Martin schooled her features, and leaving the house, neared the stables.

The two hired hands heard her footsteps, and pistol in hand they stepped forth from ambush, only to conceal their weapons when they recognized their visitor.

For an instant the ranchero's wife hesitated as the two men stood before her, their hats respectfully removed. She could not bear witness against her husband, even though she knew that these men were perfectly trustworthy, and that they knew all about the fatal weakness which beset him.

"Has Mr. Martin ridden away, yet?" she at length asked, vainly striving to conceal her anxiety.

"Yes, ma'am," bobbed Dick Hebron, who fairly worshiped the little woman, ever since she nursed him night and day when he was flat on his back with a fever from which the doctor predicted he would never recover—nor would he, only for her tender, unceasing care. "He had me saddle up Golden Girl, an' he rid away to'rds town nigh onto half a hour ago—ain't it, Van?"

"Jest about," was the laconic reply. "He had just about time to git to the—"

"Ain't one o' them hosses down, Van?" sharply interposed Hebron, at the same time punching his mate in the ribs so violently that the end of the sentence was effectually knocked into an inarticulate grunt, while that side of his face nearest Mrs. Martin was distorted by a horrible grimace. "Go see—quick!"

Luckily the poor woman was too sadly disturbed in her own mind to look beneath the surface. Still hoping to save her husband and at the same time keep the pitiful secret even from these friendly men, she spoke hurriedly:

"He told me that he had business of the utmost importance to attend to in town, but I hoped he had not gone yet. Please take a horse and tell him—no, I had better write a note. You can give him that, and then there will be no danger of your forgetting what to say."

"All right, ma'am—reckon I kin find him."

"You must find him—and with as little delay as possible," exclaimed the half-distracted woman. "Come to the house as soon as your horse is ready."

She dared trust herself to say no more, and hurried away, while Dick Hebron entered the stable.

"Van," he said, as he met his mate, "ef it wasn't fer bein' onpolite, I'd say you came the highest to bein' a nat'ral born durn fool o' any two-legged critter I hed the misfortin to know—blamed ef I wouldn't!"

"An' ef you wasn't a cussed idjit, I'd cave your head in like a rotten gourd!" was the angry rejoinder. "What in blue blazes'd I done fer you to bust in a couple dozen ribs—say?"

"Twasn't so much fer what you had done, as fer what ye was goin' to do, boy," was the prompt reply. "Couldn't you see the poor lady was sufferin' enough without tellin' that? Only for me, you'd 'a' blatted it right out. You ain't much on the talk, but when you do git started once, a wind-mill ain't a primin' 'longside that tongue o' yours! Thar was only one way, an' so I knocked the rest o' the words out o' ye in one chunk, all so mixed up that a heathen Chinese couldn't make head nor tail of it."

"Didn't you say, your own self, just afore she come—"

"Ef I did, it was to you, not to her. Ef what we thought mought 'a' happened is so, time enough for her to find it out when it can't be kept secret no longer. Git out my saddle—I've got to go to town."

Van Riley was silenced, if not convinced.

Not long after Henry Martin parted from them, they had caught the faint echo of a rifle or pistol-shot, coming from the direction he had taken. From the direction in which Theodore Freeman had gone, as well. And knowing of the hot quarrel which had so recently taken place between the two men, remembering, too, the parting words of the hot-tempered ranchero, they believed that the shot had been fired by him, or else that he had been the unfortunate target.

Disliking Freeman as they did, the last was the view they believed the most readily. Martin had been ambushed by the unmasked villain and shot down.

They knew that the ranchero had made many bitter enemies among the lawless by his recent actions, arming, mounting and paying men to hunt them down, though his physical weakness would not allow him to take a more active part

in the crusade; but they had no room for thoughts of assassination from that quarter.

Dick Hebron was on the point of sallying forth to learn if aught evil had befallen their employer, when Mrs. Martin came down to the stables, and Riley would have divulged their suspicions, only for the prompt action of his mate.

"Hello, in there!" called out a voice, and the startled men saw a dark figure standing in the doorway.

Their first thought was that Theodore Freeman had returned, and instantly their revolvers were whipped forth, but the intruder must have been gifted with a cat-like vision, for he leaped swiftly back out of sight, crying angrily:

"Come, none o' that! Don't shoot a man for trying to save a dying fellow-being!"

It was not the voice of Theodore Freeman, nor of any other whom they could recognize, and a little ashamed of their alarm, the two men advanced toward the entrance.

"Show yourself, then," cried Hebron, sternly. "It's mighty hard telling who to trust nowa-days, thar's so cussed many dirty scamps layin' around loose. Show yourself, an' han's up, or down goes your meat-house!"

With a short, careless laugh the man complied, stepping out into the moonlight, his empty hands raised above his head.

A tall, gaunt form, a thin, deeply-lined face that was harsh and repulsive even under the softening light of the moon. A rough dress, such as miners generally wore, soiled and ragged. A belt about his waist which fairly bristled with weapons.

"Seems to me you're mighty particular—"

"Have to be, stranger," was the cool interruption. "The woods is just full o' p'izen scamps like Joaquin an' his right lower, Three-Fingered Jack—"

"May the devil fry them in their own fat!" muttered the stranger, with a swift glance around him. "There is no comfort in life now that those scoundrels have taken openly to the road, and a man has to keep his eyes open or run the risk of breaking his blessed neck by stumbling over the dead bodies that lie everywhere! Only now— But tell me, is not this the Martin ranch?"

"What do you want to know for?" cautiously asked Dick.

The response was prompt and startling enough.

"A man bade me come here and ask for help. I found him up the road, a mile or so, flat on his back, a bullet through his lungs. He said his name was Henry Martin—"

"Martin shot—who did it?" demanded Hebron, coming closer, his pale face hard set, his eyes blazing, his whole demeanor expressing the sudden suspicion born in his mind.

"I asked him," was the cool answer, the man betraying not the faintest shadow of fear, even if he read the action of the American aright. "He couldn't tell until I had emptied my flask down his throat. Then he said that Theodore—something—I couldn't just understand him—"

"Theodore Freeman?" demanded Hebron, excitedly.

"It may have been that—I couldn't swear to more than the first name, though, in such a serious case. I would have waited to make sure, but he fainted again, and I feared he would die before I could bring the help he asked. So I left him and ran all the way here."

The story seemed straight enough, and coincided well with what they knew had happened, still Dick Hebron was unsatisfied. The brutal, degraded countenance of the stranger rendered him doubly suspicious. Despite the dislike which he entertained for Theodore Freeman, Dick could not help feeling that this fellow looked far more like an assassin than the other.

"Why didn't you bring him along with you?"

The man stretched out his arms with a short laugh.

"Am I a giant? Could I carry a big, two-hundred pound man like him? And the ranch miles away, for all I knew? Instead, I almost run my legs off—"

"Who are you? What is your name— Ha!" Dick Hebron cried, the truth flashing upon him as he noticed the hand of the stranger, lacking one finger. "Three-Fingered Jack!"

"Yes—Three-Fingered Jack, curse you!" snarled the fellow, burying a long blade in the unfortunate man's throat, jerking the weapon forth with such force and dexterity that its keen edge nearly severed the head from its trunk!

Before the slower-witted Riley could realize the terrible truth, before he could utter cry or draw a weapon, the noose of a lasso fell about his throat, and he was jerked from his feet, falling heavily upon his back. The breath and senses were driven from his body, but notwithstanding this, Three-Fingered Jack leaped upon him, stabbing him through and through, growling and snarling like some ferocious wild beast as each repeated blow sent a bloody spray over his satanic face and claw-like hands!

Three-Fingered Jack! The criminal annals of every known country under the sun might be ransacked without finding his equal as a ferocious monster whose only redeeming trait

was that of utter fearlessness. He killed for the sake of killing, reveling in the sight of blood. Two thirds of the murders attributed to Joaquin and his band, were the work of his hand alone. Joaquin's career was frequently lightened by gleams of true chivalry, showing that the man was not *all* bad, that the terrible, heart-crushing wrongs he had been made to suffer, from the hands of the race he afterward punished so bitterly, alone had made him the demon of blood and rapine. But not so Three-Fingered Jack. His trail was marked with blood from first to last, and it is estimated that over three hundred lives were cut short by his hand alone, during his brief career in California!

He served his apprenticeship under the notorious Padre Jurata, in Mexico—fitting chief for such a monster!—and ended by out-deviling that demon himself!

With a ferocious laugh, Manuel Garcia arose from the horribly cut and gashed corpse of his latest victim, and stepped over to where stood a dozen men, one of whom held the lasso with which poor Riley had been overthrown.

"You see, it was easy enough! Those American devils will fight, if you give them time enough to rub their eyes open, but they have no wits. A man can kill a dozen before they wake up just as I served those two!"

"You are sure there are no more about?"

"In the house, maybe—not out here. I made sure of that first. Now listen. You only know that we are here for work. There was not time for the chief to tell you more, when he found out that the old man and the girl had escaped from Pedro Gonzales, bidding fair to ruin all his plans.

"He left it all to me, knowing that I had marked the old rascal down for my game, to pay him for trying to run us out of the country and ruin our trade. Only a week ago I was here and all through the house while they slept like hogs. I would have struck them, have slit the throats of them all, from big to little, only Joaquin had made me promise to wait.

"There may be no more in the house, since we found the old man there, dead; but some of these American women are perfect devils when danger threatens their young ones! I have seen them out-fight their men—and shoot! I believe they are born with a pistol in one hand and a gun in the other!

"Of course we could make a rush, and burst in the door or windows, before they knew what was up, but then there would be fighting, and the wrong one might be hurt. You heard what the captain told me as we parted. Take the women alive, so there will be no mistake. After, do what you will with the old woman, but if a hair of the girl's head is harmed, he who does it will have to answer to Joaquin!"

"Does he mean to give us a queen?" asked one of the party.

"Maybe so—I don't know. And though I'm no chicken, as some of you can testify, I'm not anxious to pry into his secrets while he is in his present mood," said the bloodthirsty rascal, shrugging his shoulders, significantly.

"There used to be an ugly dog here. I'd as soon have a grizzly after me!" muttered one of the gang, with an uneasy glance about him, but Garcia only laughed.

"He came at me that night, but I knifed the brute so quick and sure that not a sound escaped him. For fear the cur would tell tales, I carried him to the stream and sunk him to the bottom, then came back and covered up the blood-marks. Be easy. He has not been replaced yet. We have only two-legged animals to deal with now," the rascal assured them.

Bidding his men to remain where they were, Three-Fingered Jack glided away and approached the house. As he anticipated, he found the doors and windows all closed, the latter guarded by close-fitting, heavy oaken shutters. Not a sound could he hear from within, and feeling assured that the inmates were all asleep, he returned to his mates.

"It will be easy work, if you follow orders closely," he said, with a savage grin. "There's no one awake in the house, and when we get inside, they can do nothing before we have them foul."

"Unless they are roused by our breaking in."

"No danger of that. We will steal forward and crawl under the veranda, yonder. From there we go into the cellar, and so into the house. We'll take off our foot-gear in the cellar and then we wouldn't rouse up a weasel!"

"Come—but remember! Make sure of the women first. Then slit all other throats, and pick up what plunder you fancy, for when we leave the red cock will crow on the roof-tree, to tell the whole land that Joaquin and his men know how to strike back at those who work against him!"

Led by the bloodthirsty demon, the gang of outlaws left the shelter of the barns and stole silently toward the house, sinking down and crawling under the broad veranda.

CHAPTER XIII.

A HEROIC DEFENSE.

THE terrible discovery she had made, drove Mrs. Martin half-wild, and she was desperate in-

deed when she hastened back to her house. The idea of writing a note had suddenly occurred to her, and fearing that anything less than his overpowering love for Lura would fail to check the mad craving for drink, she hastily traced a few lines, begging Henry Martin to return home at once, if he hoped to see his poor child alive.

"It is true," she muttered with a half-hysterical laugh, "only not in the sense that he will read it. He not *her* will die—merciful God! spare us this last dread blow! Send him back to us in his right mind, and give us the power to shield him from further temptation!"

She sunk upon her knees beside her chair, and prayed as only a brave hearted, loving woman can pray. If he could have seen and heard her then, perhaps there might have been some hope for Henry Martin.

How long she remained thus, Mrs. Martin never knew, but she suddenly roused up, remembering how all important every moment might prove, and wondering why Dick Hebron had not called for the note ere this. Surely he had had more than time enough to saddle a horse—

She reached the door—then halted like one suddenly converted into a statue of stone. A frightful sight met her gaze, there in the moonlighted space before the stables.

She saw Three-Fingered Jack leap upon Dick Hebron, almost severing his head from his body at a single sweep of his deadly knife; she saw the face of Van Riley, and even at that distance it seemed as though she could distinguish the red jets of blood that followed the assassin's swiftly falling knife.

For nearly a minute she stood thus, unable to stir or utter a sound. Then with a quick rush the blood flowed back, and that benumbing spell was broken. As if by intuition she realized the peril which threatened her and hers. She could not have been more certain of this, had she heard the very words which Manuel Garcia was even then speaking to his followers.

She knew that her husband had made many enemies among the lawless element by the part he played in fitting out forces to clear the country of the twin curse of murder and theft. She knew that on one occasion at least his life had been attempted, and that threats had been made against him and all concerned with him.

"Thank Heaven he is not here to-night!" dropped involuntarily from her lips, for the moment forgetting that a far more terrible danger threatened her husband in the town to which he had stolen away.

Swiftly, silently she closed and fastened the door, then as rapidly made the windows and all other openings secure, expecting the attack to be made with each passing moment. Then, while pausing for breath, she stood by one of the front windows, where a small crack in the oaken shutter allowed her a partial view of the open space beyond.

She fairly held her breath as she saw a dark figure noiselessly gliding past, clearly inspecting the building. She knew then that her worst fears were about to be realized—that they were to be attacked.

She waited and watched until she saw the spy return to the stables, where she caught a glimpse of a considerable force awaiting him, then turned and hastened up-stairs to the room where she had left poor Lura.

The child—for she seemed but little more now, in the abandonment of her hopeless grief—turned her tear-stained face toward the door as her mother entered. What she saw there chilled her heart with horror.

"Father—he has not—"

Mrs. Martin rushed forward and clasped her hand over Lura's lips, to smother the terrified cry which she saw was on the point of being uttered.

"Hush!" she muttered, almost sternly, for right well she knew that there was little time to waste in explanations if the enemy was to be kept from entering the house. "Father is safe for the present—has gone back to town—it is us that the danger threatens. Lura! rouse up—be a woman! Unless you can help me fight those devils off, we are lost! And more than us—the children—think of them!"

The poor mother's voice ended in a low wail of agony as she thought of the two helpless ones—even more helpless than they—a boy and a girl, now soundly sleeping in the same chamber where they stood.

Then the proud blood which Lura had inherited through her father, showed itself. Her own sorrows were forgotten, and she it was who formed the staff for her mother to lean upon in that brief space when her own courage failed her.

"Stay with them—I'll alarm the hired men—"

"They are dead—murdered! I saw them fall—saw them stabbed and cut to pieces—they lie out there now in the moonlight by the stables—"

"Then we have only our own arms to depend upon," said Lura, pale as death, but with voice and nerves steady as those of the most phlegmatic veteran. "If you could only tell me, in one word, just what we have to fear, mother."

Her quiet, resolute tone did its work well.

The hysterical feeling left Mrs. Martin, and she was once more the clear-witted, fearless heroine.

"A band of men—nearly a dozen, I should judge—killed the hired men. I happened to see them, too late to give the alarm or interfere. I closed the doors and windows. Then I saw one of the rascals prowling about the house, no doubt looking for the weakest part. I came here to tell you. If they enter, we are lost, for I feel that they are a part of Joaquin's band!"

While uttering these hurried explanations, Mrs. Martin was not idle. Closing the door and locking it behind them, she led the way down-stairs, taking two brace of revolvers from where they lay handy for use in case of need. They were always kept loaded and in perfect condition, for Henry Martin knew that he was a marked man, and that he would some day or night be called upon to fight hard for those he loved, as well as for his own life.

Handing two of the pistols to Lura, Mrs. Martin secured the others, in addition arming herself with a heavy rifle.

Though not experts in the use of such weapons, both mother and daughter understood how to load and fire them. It was a portion of their Californian education—necessarily so—and was now to stand them in good stead.

In her stocking feet, Mrs. Martin stole to the window from whence she could overlook the lawn, and her heart gave a suffocating leap as she caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure just disappearing beneath its broad veranda!

She dared not attempt to speak then, but drew back and pushed Lura up to the crack. She saw the same thing as another man stole from behind the clump of shrubbery and dove under the porch.

Not until that instant did they fully appreciate the danger which threatened them. They naturally expected that the attack would be made upon one of the doors or some of the windows, when they had hopes of beating the enemy off by a hot fire, or keep them at bay until aid could come—though this was a truly forlorn hope, as Marysville was far beyond the sound of firearms, and there were no nearer neighbors, unless a stray prospecting party.

Instead of this, in ten minutes or less, the outlaws would be inside the house.

The building stood upon a square rock-foundation, which rose near a yard above the level of the ground, built thus because the soil was very damp at certain seasons of the year. Under the house was a cellar, filling the whole space, and on each of the four sides was a narrow window in the masonry for ventilation. These windows were guarded by stout oaken bars, but they would soon yield to the edge of a keen knife. The veranda was built on square pillars, thus leaving a considerable space beneath its floor, large enough for men to crawl through on hands and knees.

An entrance effected into the cellar by means of this window, the rest would be as easy as Three-Fingered Jack said. A flight of stairs led up to a small pantry, which was shut off from the kitchen by a door secured only with a common thumb-latch. Frail barrier to be all that stood between them and death, but the courage of the two women rose with the emergency.

"Come," softly breathed Mrs. Martin, touching Lura on the shoulder. "They may be inside now. We must meet them as they try to come up. We may be able to drive them back. If not—better death than to fall into such hands!"

No need for her to say more. More than one tale of horrible outrages committed by just such devils as these—perhaps by the very same—was going the rounds. Death was a thousand-fold preferable, and if the worst should come, when the last hope was gone, they resolved to expend one shot on themselves.

The moonlight shimmered in through a window, partly lighting up the little kitchen. The door leading into the pantry was still closed. The enemy had not yet come up the cellar steps.

Lura, with a sudden hope, pointed to the table and few pieces of furniture in the room, then toward the door. Mrs. Martin understood her meaning, but shook her head negatively.

"They would hear the noise, and try fire," she whispered.

No more was said. They heard the sound of muffled footsteps on the cellar floor, and the low, inarticulate muttering of voices.

One look, in which were strangely mingled love, despair and a stern determination to fight to the bitter end—then the two women drew nearer to the pantry door, and held their weapons in readiness for instant use.

The minutes rolled on with frightful slowness, as it seemed to the waiting women. Though they knew that they could not hope to hold out long after the first shot was fired, they almost prayed for that moment to come, so terrible, so unbearable was this painful suspense. Each minute was an age of agony, yet they did not for one instant hesitate in their stern resolve to fight the unequal battle to the last. They had one hope—that the outlaws would be so infuriated by this desperate resistance as to

murder them outright, and thus save them from the sin of suicide.

Then came a slight creaking as some heavy weight pressed upon the cellar stairs. A few moments later they saw the catch slowly raise, and the door move toward them a trifle.

It paused, and the women held their breath lest the listening enemy should hear it. Then—Mrs. Martin saw a white spot against the edge of the door. It was a human hand, three finger tips alone in view—the hand of Three-Fingered Jack, raising the door on its hinges a trifle to guard against its creaking should the hinges be rusty.

Yielding to a mad impulse, Mrs. Martin flung her whole weight against the door, closing it upon the fingers. There came a snarling curse and the fingers were jerked away, though not entirely unscathed, for a spray of blood struck the woman in the face.

Stung with pain, taken completely by surprise, Three-Fingered Jack lost his footing and tumbled headlong down the cellar stairs, clearing it of his followers. Luckily for him he was not the first to arise.

The heroic women heard a heavy rush, then the door was flung open. Instantly Mrs. Martin fired, and shot through the heart, the leading outlaw staggered back and would have fallen down the steps, but for the supporting arms of his mates.

Rapidly as they could work their weapons, Lura and her mother poured a deadly hailstorm upon the enemy, and in ten seconds from that first shot, the cellar stairs were again cleared, dead, dying, and soured men lying in a heap at the foot, groaning, shrieking, and cursing!

Mrs. Martin grasped Lura by the arm and fled from the kitchen, but not through fear. Her blood was up, and she thought only of making the best fight that lay in their power.

"Quick! help me with the furniture!" she panted, closing and locking the door. "Step by step we must fight them!"

With a strength lent by the occasion, they dragged the heaviest articles in the room over to the door, bracing and piling them up until quite a barricade was erected.

At that instant the voices of the younger children were heard, screaming loudly, as though terribly frightened or in bitter agony. For one moment the mother stood doubting—then, as the screams came still sharper, she turned and fled from the room, leaving Lura alone to oppose the cursing enemy.

CHAPTER XIV.

ANOTHER HAND IN THE GAME.

A MAN glided out of the shadows and while controlling the terrified Golden Girl by means of the lasso which he still held, stooped over the motionless form of Henry Martin.

Only an instant his scrutiny lasted. From early childhood familiar with wounds and their effects, one glance satisfied him in this case, and he rose erect, looking back to where the assassin still stood, as though frozen in his tracks by the sight of the dreadful deed he had done.

"You've done it *this* time, boss!" he exclaimed, at the same time shortening the length of lasso between himself and Golden Girl, drawing it in hand over hand. "The old fool's dead meat—shot plum through the gizzard!"

There was no immediate response. The murderer advanced slowly, then bent over the form of his victim.

He, too, arrived at the same conclusion, but there was little trace of remorse in his tones as he spoke:

"You heard what he said? The old fool recognized me, and rode at me with the intention of using his whip. Was I to stand with my hands folded, and be lashed like a dog?"

"Tain't none o' my pie, boss. You're runnin' the machine, an' know better'n me what kind o' grease the wheels need."

Quiet and respectful enough both words and tone were, but the murderer seemed to read reproach in them; or possibly it was only the pricking of his own conscience.

"He recognized me, and called me by name. And you know what happened back yonder! Everything was working smooth as anybody could wish, when this old fool and Lota—curse them both!—must spoil it all! After that, what chance would I have as Theodore Freeman—or any other name, for that matter, since they knew the face so well—while *he* lived?"

"Looks kinder funny—kill the pap to marry the gal!"

This terse comment may not have been intended for the ears of the assassin, it was breathed so low, but he caught its purport, and flashed out in threatening rage:

"Look out, Dirty Dick! You've been more to me, ten thousand-fold, than this carrion," thrusting the motionless body with his foot; "but if you try to cross me now, in what I have sworn to accomplish, I'll kill you as unsparingly as I shot down Henry Martin!"

"Tain't the might o' your han', nur yet the fear o' your threats, that keeps me in the traces, *Ray*—"

"Not that name, curse you!" snarled the

other. "Call me Theodore Freeman. *This* won't make me throw up my hand, and I mean to play the game through on the old cards."

"Jest as you say. It's the *man*, not the handle, I'm stickin' to. We've follered the same trail too long fer me to let it split in two pieces now, long's my grip kin hold it together. But I can't keep my tongue chained down at both ends. You hain't bin the same man sence you tuck up this idee, an' I'm monstrous afeared it'll end in a big bust up, whar you'll be the wuss busted of all!"

Theodore Freeman—or Raymon Salcedo, as we will term him henceforth, for that was his right name—laughed shortly.

"Bah! don't croak, Dick! With *him* out of the way, I can throw dust into the eyes of the woman. It's a prize worth working for. Even *he* did not dream how rich he was, if he would but open his eyes and look around him. With my hand at the helm, all will be smooth sailing, and inside of two years I'll be the richest man in the world! And you, old Dick—"

He paused abruptly, for the veteran turned swiftly upon him with a gesture meaning silence. And then he heard what had alarmed the keen-eared scout—the rapid trampling of numerous hoofs, coming from down the road which led to Marysville.

For a single instant Dick Sleeper hesitated. Golden Girl, still frightened and suspicious, was yet several yards distant, hanging back on the end of the lasso, and he knew that he could gain her head only after patient endeavor, or a stout struggle. In either case the result would be perilous, if not fatal. There was no time for the former, and in the other the sound of her trampling hoofs would almost certainly reach the ears of the party approaching.

Of the two evils, Dirty Dick chose the least, drawing his knife and severing the hide rope at a single slash.

The mare made one leap, as if to pass them and return to her stable, but Dirty Dick sprang before her and flung up his arms in her very face. Swiftly wheeling, the terrified creature dashed down the road leading to Marysville, and direct for the party of horsemen.

A startled cry from the lips of Raymon Salcedo was cut short by Dirty Dick grasping his arm and leaping back from the moonlight into the shadow.

"Take kiver, an' be ready fer some slick dodgin', ef them fellers take a notion to hunt fer the one that knocked *him* over," nodding toward the motionless form lying in the dust. "Ef they're Vigilantes, an' ketch us, salt won't save us from sp'illin' on their han's—but it may be Joaquin an' his gang, or some other outfit on the cross, an' then we're right enough, fer all them hate the old man like pizen!"

Raymon Salcedo quickly realized the truth of all this, and the two men lay low in the dense undergrowth at a point nearly opposite where the ranchero lay weltering in his blood. Here they could command a full view of the road for several rods, while themselves concealed by the heavy shadows, in cover so thick that no horseman could force a passage through it swift enough to overtake a fugitive on foot.

Dirty Dick caught his companion by the arm and pointed out two shadowy forms stealing silently along the road, one on each side, keeping close in the shadows cast by the timber, evidently sent ahead as scouts to solve the mystery of the riderless mare.

They crept on past the body of the ranchero, then slipped in through the undergrowth, to make sure that no ambush had been placed there. One of the men passed almost within arm's length of the breathless rascals, but luckily for them, as well as himself, he saw them not, and a few moments later a low, trilling whistle brought on the remainder of the party.

With a brutal, exultant laugh, one of the horsemen dismounted and bent over the body of Henry Martin.

"I knew it!" he exclaimed in Spanish, rising again, and roughly kicking the lifeless mass. "I knew it when we lassoed the mare, for I recognized her as *his* favorite riding beast! He is dead—shot through the heart! Whoever did it, was frightened off by our approach, without taking any plunder—see!" and he shook a heavy buckskin purse until the golden coins jingled merrily. "Whoever did the deed, we owe the gentleman our thanks, for not only putting a troublesome enemy out of the way, but making one less for us to fight at the ranch!"

Raymon Salcedo started convulsively as he heard these last words, and Dirty Dick grasped his arm more firmly, fearing an outburst on his part which could hardly be otherwise than fatal to them both.

But Raymon Salcedo was not eager to die, just then. He recognized the speaker, Three-Fingered Jack, and knew that he was Joaquin's lieutenant—Joaquin, who would gladly give a hand to have *him* fall alive into his power!

"It's old Martin!" observed another of the band. "Then we're bound for *his* rancho?"

"Yes—and there's no time to lose. Drag him aside into the dark; so! Our work will be done before anybody else stumbles across him lying there. Come!"

Leaping into his saddle, Three-Fingered Jack led his band up the road at a rapid pace, Golden Girl trotting along a captive in their midst.

"You heard what they said, Dick," muttered Raymon Salcedo, hoarsely as he arose from his covert. "They're about to attack the house—and none there to defend it but two men and the women!"

"An' may the Lord pity them last ef they ever fall alive into the han's o' *that* bellish gang!" exclaimed the old man, who was not all evil—who might easily have become an honor to his race, only for falling under the influence of Raymon Salcedo, whom he loved as few men can learn to love another of the same sex.

"That shall never happen while I live!" muttered the young man, his handsome face hard set, his black eyes aglow. "They must kill me first!"

"Me too, then," promptly said Dick Sleeper. "Mebbe they'll do it, too, but I reckon we kin make things mighty lively fer 'em, fer awhile, anyway."

For a moment the young man hesitated, then said:

"No—that would only sacrifice our own lives, without aiding them in the end. You must go for help—there's that body of Vigilantes at Marysville. Run there—tell them that danger threatens the Martins—say nothing about *him*—if found, the deed will be laid at *their* door, especially as they have his mare."

"An' the gal—over yonder?" hesitated the veteran.

A snarling curse broke from the lips of the other.

"Curse her! only for her turning up so unexpectedly to-night, all would have worked smoothly. Never mind—if not already dead, she has done all the harm she can. No time to bother about her now. Go—run for your life! Bring the Vigilantes—if you fail me now, old man, I'll kill you as I would my deadliest enemy!"

"Tain't fer fear o' your threats that I do as ye say, boy," replied the old man, with a dignity that almost ennobled his rugged features and filthy garments which had given him the peculiar title he bore. "Ef you didn't hold a greater power over old Dick Sleeper than *them*, I'd 'a' been a free man long ago, 'stead o' sarvin' ye night an' day, only to be cussed at an' threatened whenever aught goes crookedways with ye—"

"Pardon me, Daddy Dick," interrupted Salcedo, but with more of impatience than contrition in his tones. "I didn't mean all I said, but you know how I feel. I'd rather die than lose the stake I am playing for now."

"You won't lose it through me, if bone, muscle an' sinner kin kiver the ground quick enough. Take keer o' yerself, boy. Better you do the runnin', and let me look after the fightin'—"

An impatient gesture cut his speech short, and sent him down the road at a long, easy lope, but which carried him over the ground with remarkable rapidity.

Only an instant Raymon Salcedo watched him, then passed swiftly up the road on the tracks of the outlaws.

He had no definite plan of action in view. He knew that he could not reach the Martin ranch before the enemy, yet he was resolved that Lura should not fall into the hands of the merciless demon, Manuel Garcia, while he drew the breath of life.

Only once did his pace slacken. That was when he came opposite the spot where Lota Sylva pleaded her cause so piteously, yet ineffectually.

His face was white and ghastly as that of a corpse as he paused and looked toward the clump of timber, one hand upon his knife-hilt, in the attitude of one who anticipates an attack from some desperate enemy.

Only for a few moments; then his breath came freely again, and a short, strained laugh parted his lips.

"Bah! I am a fool! There was no sound—only the mad fancy that has heard her groan and scream—the howling of that brat—only the fancy that has made me hear them in every sound and rustle since I struck her down! I didn't mean to kill her—but she would have it!"

"Curses on the crooked fortune that has sent her here, just as my carefully-laid plans were about succeeding!"

By working himself into a rage, he smothered out the pang of remorse that had stung his heart, and without another glance toward the clump of timber that held such a black secret, he hastened on up the road.

It is not necessary to follow him step by step. Enough that he found where the outlaws had concealed their horses, and that as he crept cautiously nearer, he was just in time to see Three-Fingered Jack arise from the horribly mutilated body of poor Van Riley.

He counted the enemy. Twelve well-armed, desperate rascals to whom murder and fighting was a treat. Against them, his single arm, two women and two scarcely more helpless children. Long odds, truly!

Yet he did not flinch. Whatever his failings, Raymon Salcedo was not a physical coward.

More firmly than ever he was resolved to foil

the outlaws, or lose his own life in the desperate attempt. But how?

He saw Manuel Garcia steal away on his reconnoitering expedition, and lying flat on his stomach, he crept away, as silent and easily as the serpent whose progress he imitated.

Keeping close under cover, he followed Three-Fingered Jack, keeping him in sight through all his windings, and being thoroughly familiar with the house and all its peculiarities, he had little difficulty in divining the manner in which the attempt would be made.

He lay low until Manuel Garcia returned to his companions, then slowly circled round the house himself.

"The women can't have gone to sleep so soon—I know that *she* will sleep little to-night!" he muttered, his thoughts resting on poor Lura. "If I was sure that I could make them hear, without also arousing those devils, I'd try—bah!" and he laughed harshly, barely above his breath. "The old woman would be the one to come, and she would sooner see the devil himself now than me! She'd be more apt to shoot than admit me—so that plan won't work!"

It was a perplexing enigma, and the more he racked his brain, the further off seemed the solution. There was little time to lose, if he hoped to be of service to those within the house. Already the outlaws were preparing to move, as he could see from his hiding-place near the corner of the house. Ten minutes more would suffice for them to cut a way into the cellar, and then—

"If I could only get *her* out, I'd care little for the rest," he muttered, with a dark frown, as he saw Three-Fingered Jack stealing across the open space near the stables. "That hell-hound makes clean work when he strikes. I'd not shed many tears over—Ha! why not?" he grated, his eyes flashing like living coals. "I know her chamber; she must be there; she felt the shock so terribly! I'll try it!"

He paused only long enough to see that Three-Fingered Jack crept beneath the veranda, where he could work at the cellar window without fear of being seen, then he stole away, creeping to the back of the house.

"That's her window!" he muttered, looking up to the chamber where Lura Martin usually slept. "How to get up there? Ha! a lasso—round that chimney!"

Gliding swiftly away until he could approach the stables from the rear without fear of being seen by the outlaws, whom he believed were or soon would be all beneath the veranda, Raymon Salcedo secured a lasso, then returned as he came.

At the first cast, the noose settled over the chimney, then hung down directly over the window. A hard, low laugh escaped his lips, and his face was that of a devil incarnate!

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.

For a brief space Lura Martin was quite as much unnerved as her mother, when those piteous screams for aid came down from the chamber where they had left the children sleeping. The same horrible fear assailed them both—that the enemy had divided their forces, and were making the attempt from both sides at the same time.

She turned to follow her mother, who had forgotten all else with the shrieks of her helpless babes ringing in her ears; but just then came the rush of cursing, snarling outlaws across the kitchen floor, and she knew that death would surely follow unless she could keep them at bay.

No longer the gentle, quiet, almost timid girl—more like a lioness fighting in defense of her cubs!

Gifted with a strength far beyond her usual measure, Lura piled more furniture on and against the barricade, until the door was almost completely hidden from view.

With a heavy shock the infuriated outlaws came against it, only to be dashed back, bruised and cursing, themselves the only thing at all shaken.

Pistol-butts and knife-handles began to hammer at the upper panels, while the lower ones were saluted with kicks as heavy as human legs could deliver; then came an irregular volley, the battered lead whistling over and around the head of the brave girl beyond the barrier.

Still the noble creature did not quail. Instead, the humming of lead nerved her courage to a still higher pitch, and guided by the sense of touch, she thrust her pistol through the barricade and fired through the middle panel several shots in swift succession.

A wild howl of fury from Three-Fingered Jack told her that at least a portion of her lead had found a sensitive resting place, while a heavy fall shook the kitchen floor.

Luckily for himself, unfortunately for all honest men, Manuel Garcia was not the man who fell. One of the bullets grazed him smartly, glancing from a rib, stinging him like a keen spur, but only inflicting a painful flesh wound.

The man who stood nearest to him, however, fared not so well. Glancing up after passing through the tough, panel, the battered lead

slipped under his breast-bone and gave him his death-wound.

Wild with rage, Three-Fingered Jack leaped to where the heavy kitchen table stood, and calling his men to his aid, they used this clumsy battering-ram against the door.

In swift succession came the heavy shocks, and a dull despair began to enter the poor girl's heart as she saw the panels begin to splinter, and the stout lock show signs of giving way. Five minutes more would complete the job, unless she could by some means check them.

There was only the one resource. She sent shot after shot through the splintering panels, but with what effect, she could not even guess. The frightful clatter of the rapidly working ram, drowned all other sounds.

Suddenly she whirled around, alarmed by the slipping of some one on the stairs—hearing the sound in a lull between those heavy assaults on the door. She saw a human form, and instinctively covered it with her pistol, and pulled trigger. The hammer fell, but no explosion followed. She had emptied the weapon through the door—and an instant later she saw cause for thankfulness that such was the case.

"Lura—come!" gasped Mrs. Martin, her voice barely recognizable, so full of horror and mother-woe was it. "These devils are locked in with the children—murdering them by inches!"

One backward glance at the rapidly yielding door, but it was purely mechanical. From upstairs came a wilder scream than ever, followed by a crash and jingle of breaking glass. Lent fresh strength by that sound, Mrs. Martin turned and rushed up the stairs again, Lura following her scarcely less swiftly, at the same time changing revolvers and making sure that the second weapon had several charges remaining in it.

She found her mother pounding upon the chamber door with her hands, mingling prayers with threats. Poor mother! She could face death calmly enough, when it threatened only herself, but where her little children were concerned, she was a mother through and through.

"Spare them! do not harm them, as you hope for mercy hereafter!" she shrieked, bruising her hands against the tough, unyielding wood. "Kill me—do with me what you will, but spare them! Heaven's blasted curses on your souls, if you harm even so much as a hair of their heads! I will tear you limb from limb! Mercy! open the door—my children—my poor, poor children!"

From within came a stern, harsh voice, but the two women fail to distinguish the words, or recognize the speaker. The two children ceased their screaming.

"My God!" shrieked Mrs. Martin, now fairly beside herself. "They are dead—murdered!"

She sunk down upon the landing, in a stupor of despair.

Lura just then came up, and trying to save her mother from falling, she struck her forehead against the key which had been left in the lock by Mrs. Martin when she hastened downstairs to oppose the outlaws. In her frenzy of fear and despair, she had forgotten this.

For the space of a single breath Lura hesitated. From the floor below came the yells of the enemy, who were now tearing the splintered door to pieces, and pushing aside the lighter articles of furniture which formed the top of the barricade, to clear a passage through which they might crawl and seek revenge for their heavy losses, as well as all the trouble they had been put to. Inside the chamber she believed were more of the same infamous, bloodthirsty gang. To open the door would only be to place them between two fires. But the children—her little brother and sister! They might yet be living—she might be able to save them!

That thought conquered all else, and turning the key, she flung the chamber door wide open.

She caught a glimpse of a man just leaping into the room over the low window sill, and instantly leveled her revolver.

"Lura! my darling! I come to save you!"

The maiden recognized the voice, rather than the speaker, but it was too late for her to stay her shot. The pistol exploded, and as the man staggered back, a low wail of bitter agony burst from her lips, and she sunk upon the floor, all unnerved, for she believed that she had slain Theodore Freeman—the man she had loved, the one she still loved far better than life itself!

The pistol-shot aroused Mrs. Martin, and seeing the open door, she rose and rushed inside, just as poor Lura fell.

Well for Raymon Salcedo then that she had lost her pistols in her terror; else his dark life-trail would have ended then and there. She saw her child fall, like one death-stricken, and seeing the assassin before her, as she supposed, sprung upon him, a literal fury.

Half-blinded by the shot, and startled too, for the lead had fairly broken the skin of his cheek and ear, Raymon Salcedo only partially foiled the mad rush of the ranchero's wife. He kept her fingers from closing on his throat, but staggered back before the fierce assault, almost losing his footing.

For a brief space, he sought only to hold her powerless until he could make her understand

that he had come as a friend, but when his blood began to flow, and he felt the tearing of her nails, his anger rose, until he dealt her a heavy blow in the face with his fist, that broke her mad hold and sent her staggering back, to fall in a senseless heap across the bed where the frightened, wild-eyed children lay huddled in each other's arms.

"Thousand curses on the old hag!" panted Salcedo, for the instant forgetting what ears might catch his fierce words. "I'd rather tackle a panther—Lura!" he added, as the poor girl tried to arise.

"Theodore!" she gasped, pressing her throbbing temples with her trembling hands, and staring at him as though she saw a ghost. "Theodore—and alive? I thought—then it was all a dream—a frightful dream—"

She ceased abruptly, for from below there came a loud crash that announced the final and complete overthrow of the barricade, followed by the wild yells and angry curses of the outlaw band as they scrambled over the debris.

That uproar partly cleared her mystified brain, and she remembered much of what had happened that night.

The moonlight showed her face paler than ever as she shrunk back from the outstretched arms of Raymon Salcedo, and he noticed the expression of horror in her widely distended eyes.

How came he there? Was he one of that infamous band? Had he brought them with him to make sure his revenge?

Plainly as though she had put these questions into words, Raymon Salcedo understood and answered her.

"I came to save you, Lura, from a fate far worse than death! There's no time to tell all now—we are lost if we falter a moment! Come—I can carry you down the rope—I know where those devils left their horses—we can escape—"

"With mother and the children?" the maiden asked, quickly.

"If there is time—but you first," he answered, evasively. "For the love of heaven, darling, do not hesitate now! Those devils are on the stairs even now! They will be here in a moment! Think of what will be your doom in those hands!"

He sought to clasp her in his arms, but she eluded him, and closed the door. There was no doubt, no irresolution in her tones or face now as she spoke again:

"Save them first—I will not desert them. If you loved me, you would not ask it—would know me better than that."

For one instant it seemed as though he would leap upon her and bear her away despite herself; but only for a moment. Then he knew that the chance was gone, that it was too late!

The outlaws were already on the stairs, rushing up with frenzied yells and curses that told what little mercy those poor women would receive at their hands.

Once more Raymon Salcedo showed that he was no coward.

He might have saved himself by a hasty retreat through the window by which he had effected an entrance, for the outlaws were as yet in ignorance that any save women and children garrisoned the house, but instead, he flung open the door, despite the resistance made by Lura to what she deemed either treachery or a suicidal act, and opened a rapid fire on the outlaws as they crowded the narrow stairway.

It was the only chance that offered any hope of foiling them. If once they were suffered to secure a foothold on the second floor, all was lost, and so Raymon Salcedo knew.

Twin streams of flame leaped from his revolvers, one in each hand, so swiftly did he work them, and deadly indeed was the leaden hail poured home at such close quarters.

The leaders recoiled, dead or cowed, as they saw that a man was barring the way. And then the narrow passage was cleared, dead and living tumbling down the stairs all in a heap!

Too experienced to even think of pressing on and risking the loss of the advantage he had thus bloodily won, Raymon Salcedo leaped back into the chamber, and began swiftly reloading his weapons, knowing that another and more dangerous rush would follow as soon as the enemy could recover from that terrible surprise.

Once more, Lura, will you go?" he muttered, hurriedly. "There will just be time. I can take you down the rope, and reach their horses before they can intercept us. Speak—quick!"

"With them, yes—without, no!" was the firm response.

His face was in the shadow now, else the poor girl might have read in it what a demon he could be when crossed. His muscles stiffened, and he was just on the point of springing upon her, to bear her away despite her brave resolution to share the fate of her relatives, when a fortunate interruption came, and saved the maiden, for the time being.

The heavy trampling of horses—a loud, ringing cheer, such as only Anglo-Saxon throats can utter! Help had come at last!

Three-Fingered Jack and those of his comrades in crime who yet survived, also heard that thrilling sound, but their chagrin was ten-fold

that felt by Raymon Salcedo, for they knew that death stared them in the face!

They rushed to the front of the house, only to see the dark mass of horsemen charging swiftly up, while the leader, honest John Lynch, shouted out:

"No quarter for the hell-hounds! Surround the house, and cut down all who try to escape!"

Mad with terror the outlaws rushed back through the house, burst open the rear door and leaped forth. But the avengers were upon them, and the shadows were driven away before a sheet of fire!

CHAPTER XVI.

IN HIS TRUE COLORS.

RAYMON SALCEDO knew what that ringing cheer meant, and though he also knew that the safety of the Martin family was insured by his opportune arrival, he caught himself wishing that it had been delayed a few minutes.

"Until I was safe away with *her*—until those bloodhounds had forced their way in here, and forever put an end to all claims on the Martin estate but that of my wife!"

Swift as thought these words came and went—so swiftly that he himself was scarcely aware that they had been born.

Until now, Lura had borne up remarkably well through the trying and exciting scenes of that night, but now, when that sonorous cheer, that clear voice bidding its men slay the outlaws and spare not; when she heard the hasty rush of the enemy to and fro, seeking safety amid cries and oaths of terror and desperate rage—her overtaken powers gave way, and the poor girl would have fallen to the floor, only for the supporting arms of her false lover.

That evil light grew more intense in his eyes, and the white teeth showed themselves beneath his jetty mustaches as he clasped her tightly to his breast, and crossed over to the window.

Perhaps it was only curiosity; perhaps he still clung to his idea of carrying Lura away by force of arms; but if the last, the idea was quickly abandoned.

He saw the surviving outlaws fall in a heap through the shattered doors, then arise and betake themselves to flight, running as only men can run who know that certain death lies behind them—ahead their only possible chance of safety. He heard the ringing cheer change to a wild yell of hatred and revenge, as the rescuers sighted the fugitives, then all else was blotted out by a crashing volley of rifle and pistol-shots.

A sudden movement of the poor girl, whom he held in his arms, a low, gasping cry, followed by the broken words:

"No, I will not desert them! Go—save yourself—leave me to share their fate!"

She struggled out of his relaxing grasp, and staggering over to where Mrs. Martin still lay senseless, she sunk down beside her, clasping her form, then swooned dead away.

"Boss, whar is ye? 'Live or dead?' cried a shrill voice from the outside, and Raymon Salcedo knew that faithful Dick Sleeper had performed the task assigned him.

He answered with a sharp whistle, then hastened down the stairs, unclosing the front door. Dirty Dick fairly hugged him in his mad glee at finding him alive and well, after almost giving him over as dead, but Salcedo quickly released himself, annoyed rather than grateful for such a proof of love.

"Don't make such an infernal fool of yourself!" he growled, impatiently. "You found them, I see. How did you manage to make such fast time?"

"Met 'em on the road. They'd got wind o' somethin'—this or some other raid—an' hed tuck saddle fer a night ride. Lucky fer me that my tongue was pritty limber, or I'd 'a' bin hung higher 'n heaven afore I could make 'em onderstan' who I was an' what was wanted. Dog my cats, ef I didn't begin to think o' my prayers in dead airnest, the pizen hurry-ups was so monstrous keen to chris'en thar new choke-'em-tights!"

"Did you mention my name—"

"Neither one on 'em," was the swift interposition. "Didn't know as you'd like it, so kep' on the safe side. Only told 'em I'd left my mate abind to do what he could, in case I didn't git back with help soon enough. But good land! I didn't hev to hurry 'em up none. They hardly waited fer me to straddle-critter ahind the lightest cuss in the outfit, then they put in the fast licks fer all they was wuth, an' hyar I be!"

"Strike a light and look through this floor and the cellar. If there are any live game to be found, quiet it. There may be some among them who could tell ugly tales of the past. You understand, Dick?"

The old man nodded, his face showing grave enough now in the light of the moon. He was no assassin, at heart, and indeed possessed none of the attributes of such a character, but what Raymon Salcedo asked or ordered him to do, he could not refuse.

So used was Salcedo to this unquestioning obedience, that he waited not for an answer, but hastily returned up the stairs, entering the

chamber where Lura and her mother still lay senseless across the bed in which the two terrified children whimpered and sobbed, too badly scared to make any loud outcry.

There seemed to be magic in his touch, for as he tried to unclasp Lura's arms from about her mother, the maiden roused up with a low cry of alarm, only to change into a glad, happy sobbing, as she flung her arms around his neck and sunk trembling upon his breast.

For the moment she forgot his base treachery—forgot all else but that he was her first-love, and that he had risked his life to save her from frightful danger.

Raymon Salcedo was no fool. He knew that the revulsion would soon come, and he believed that by anticipating it, he could serve his purpose better.

In that instant the whole situation flashed before him. Sooner or later, the murder of Henry Martin must be discovered, and he knew that Mrs. Martin at least would first suspect him of committing the bloody deed. That suspicion might be diverted, and his presence here both explained by declaring that he saw the outlaw commit the deed, citing Dirty Dick as corroborating evidence. And his story would be helped out when Golden Girl was found among the horses of the gang led by Three-Fingered Jack!

"Poor girl—my poor darling!" he murmured, his voice soft and musical as that of a woman, his warm lips pressing a kiss upon her cold brow. "Thank Heaven I was in time to rescue you, even if I was unable to preserve him—"

Lura lifted her head and strove to free herself. Something in his tone brought back that horrible scene when the scales fell from her eyes and showed her this man in his true colors for the first time.

"My father! He followed you—you killed him—"

"Lura! are you mad to accuse me of so foul a deed?" he cried, his heavy brows contracting, his handsome form darkening with a stern frown; only to swiftly relax, as he adied, in that soft, pitying tone: "No wonder—you have passed through such terrible trials—have been called on to endure so much, more than many a stout man could undergo without his brain's giving way! I do not blame you, pet. When you are once more yourself, you will be able to do me justice."

The poor girl stared at him like one in a dream. Truly, her powers had been overtaken.

"God, knows that I would have cheerfully laid down my life, if that sacrifice could have saved him—"

"He is dead! My father—heaven pity us all, now!"

Once more her senses failed her, but as Raymon Salcedo turned to place her upon the bed, preparatory to restoring her to consciousness, he was confronted by the ranchero's wife, pale as death, but with eyes blazing like those of a maniac.

"You murdered him! Because he tore the cunning mask from your face and drove you out into the night to save *her*!" she cried, as the villain involuntarily recoiled.

The wailing cry of poor Lura had broken the spell that bound her senses. Like one in a dream she had heard her daughter accuse this man of murder—had heard his reply, which told them both that Henry Martin was indeed dead.

Quickly the arch-villain recovered his wits. He was playing for an enormous stake, and it must be admitted that he made the most of the cards he held.

"You will ask my pardon on your knees for that suspicion, Mrs. Martin," he said, more of sadness than reproach in his voice. "Those fiends in human shape shot your husband down from ambush as he crossed the Crooked Valley trail, then came here to finish their bloody work. I could not save him, but I sent my friend for aid, and came here to save you and Lura from those demons, or to die in the attempt. Does that look like—"

He paused abruptly, for Mrs. Martin, with a sobbing cry, turned and fled from the room, rushing down-stairs and out at the front door.

Dirty Dick heard and tried to stop her, but he was too slow. Swiftly leaping up the stairs, he thrust his head into the chamber, uttering in a hasty, guarded tone:

"Old 'oman's pulled out—down the road to'ards town. Shell I ketch an' bring her back, boss?"

For one instant Raymon Salcedo hesitated. Swiftly he calculated the chances, pro and con, then replied:

"No; let her go. It can do no harm as I see."

Motioning his henchman away, he turned his attention once more to the senseless maiden.

Under his ministrations, her consciousness was soon restored, and knowing that she would be more easily deceived in her present weak, shaken state, he lost no time in pouring into her ears the plausible tale his devilish ingenuity had concocted during those few minutes.

"Heaven above knows that I left this house more in grief and sorrow than in anger, darling, even against her and him—your poor father, Lura! He never liked me—never fully

trusted me, or approved of your love, pet—that you know. But I loved and respected him, next to you and your mother. I would have laid down my life to save him—but I was too late!"

"Merciful God, look down in pity!" sobbed the poor girl.

A sardonic smile curled the lip and revealed those white teeth, for the villain knew that his face was hidden from the maiden sobbing so piteously on his breast. But only sorrow and deep sympathy echoed in his voice as he resumed:

"I met a friend just after leaving the house, and he told me that a long-delayed mail had just reached Marysville—that there were letters for both your father and me, from the old home. I knew what they contained, and confident of proving my identity, I rushed madly along the road—trod on a rolling stone, and falling headlong, lay senseless for hours. Only for this, *he* might have been saved, for we would have fallen into the ambush set by the gang of Three-Fingered Jack, instead of him."

"I saw and recognized him as he rode by on Golden Girl. My friend had dragged me out of the road, to restore me. I called after him, but he did not pause. Had he heard me, even then his life might have been spared. But it was fated otherwise!"

Lura shivered convulsively in his firm embrace, but spoke not. She could only suffer in silence.

"Still weak and dizzy, I followed after him, urged on by the glad hope of proving my complete innocence even to his satisfaction, for not only did I know that the long looked for letters awaited us there in the post-office at Marysville, but my friend, on seeing my utter distraction, and questioning me as to its cause, gave me blessed hope."

"He declared he had known a man named Raymon Salcedo for years—that he once served him as a humble sort of body-guard, and was the repository of his private affairs. He declared that he could easily find the real Raymon Salcedo, and that by power of the secrets which he held, could force him to come forward and tell all. And then, when you see us both, side by side, and hear him declare his identity, you will no longer doubt my truth and fidelity, darling?"

Eagerly he spoke—breathlessly he listened for her answer. It came, but not in the anticipated shape:

"Father—my poor father! Dead—murdered—"

She had no thought for her love then. All she could realize was that her poor father had fallen victim to a most foul assassination.

Still Raymon Salcedo persisted. He knew that her brain would receive and retain all that he said, even though half-unconsciously at the time, and he trusted that it would in the end bring forth the fruit he desired.

"We heard the shot that laid him low in death. We rushed forward, and I would have lost my own life in attempting to avenge his death, only for my cooler-brained friend."

"He dragged me under cover, and then I began to realize that he had acted for the best. We could hear the devils talking, and learned that they were on their way to attack this house and put every soul to death save *you*, to avenge the injury your father had done their cause. You, darling, were to be taken alive, and handed over to the head devil, Joaquin Murieta, himself; for what purpose you may guess, but I dare not more than hint."

Again that convulsive tremor, and well satisfied, Raymon Salcedo continued his cunningly woven tale of truth and lies.

"Owing to the nature of the ground, and the force of the outlaws, we could not leave our cover until they had robbed your poor father and taken Golden Girl with them. When they passed by, I sent my friend on to town in quest of help, while I came here, to save you, or share your fate."

"I was too late to alarm or warn the hired men. Three-Fingered Jack had already murdered them before I reached the spot. Nor could I think of any way of entering the house, before they could divine my object and slay me—not that I counted my life so valuable, darling, since you dealt me that bitter blow, but I believed that I alone could save you from those demons in human guise."

"Already I saw them stealing beneath the veranda, and knew that they could soon force a way into the cellar, from thence swarm all over the house. For a few moments I was at my wit's end—then a frail chance suggested itself, and I acted upon it at once."

"I procured a lasso from the stables, and flung the noose over the chimney, then climbed up the rope. I knew that this was your chamber, and hoped to find you here. I could help you all down the rope and away, before the outlaws could realize what was going on. So I hoped, but in my haste, I slipped while trying to raise the window, and fell to the ground."

"I heard the shots within, and then the cries of the children. I was badly hurt, but the knowledge of your danger lent me renewed

strength, and I again climbed up the lasso. I burst in the window and entered. Then you came—and fired at me!

"That was the bitterest blow of all, darling, for I believed that you recognized me—that your love was so completely turned to hatred, that you sought to kill me!"

"I did not know—I was distracted—I did not recognize you until after I shot," murmured the poor girl, faintly.

With a soft gentle laugh his warm lips rested upon hers.

"It was a close call—I can hear the hum of the lead even now! But let it go. The past may die. We will live only for the future—and each other! You shall see those letters—shall hear my friend's story, and then, if you can still doubt, I will hunt up Raymon Salcedo and bring him here!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A WOMAN'S DEVOTION.

WHEN Mrs. Martin broke away from Raymon Salcedo and rushed out of the house, she was little better than a madwoman. She was only conscious of one thing, or rather a single group of facts.

Her husband was dead, had been foully assassinated. He was lying out in the night, at the mercy of every prowling wild beast. Her place was beside him, in death even as in life.

She did not know that Dirty Dick tried to intercept her. She was unconscious even of the groans and screams of the dying outlaws writhing in their gore. She heard nothing of the pistol shots and fierce shouts which proved that the tragedy was not ended yet, that one or more of the outlaw band survived, and was fleeing for life from his vindictive pursuers.

She stumbled over the corpse of poor Dick Hebron, falling with her outstretched hands into a pool of cold, clammy blood which had flowed from the frightfully gashed body of Van Riley; but the moan which came from her lips as she recovered her footing, was of impatience, rather than sorrow or grief at the sad fate which had so swiftly overtaken the two men.

She had thought only for her poor husband, lying there by the Crooked Valley trail—every word that the arch-traitor had uttered was branded in letters of fire on her brain and heart—and her sole wish was to gain his side with the least possible delay.

She entered the stable, and put the saddle and bridle on her own riding horse, acting mechanically, for she could not then have told what she was doing, had any one asked her. It was instinct, rather than reason.

She mounted, leaned far forward and urged the good horse away with voice and reins, lashing them from side to side over the creature's shoulders. Never before had she such a terrible incentive to urge her on.

A very few minutes—each one seeming to her as though it extended over a lifetime—were consumed in that mad ride. The Crooked Valley trail was neared. Her eyes were glancing swiftly from one side of the road to the other, in search of that.

Then her mare shied violently to one side, snorting loudly, trembling in every limb with the nameless terror which the noble creatures are so frequently smitten with when they unexpectedly come upon a human corpse, or scent fresh-flowing blood.

This action told Mrs. Martin that her search was ended, and leaping to the ground, she rushed to the spot where the outlaws had rudely tossed the ranchero, in the edge of the bushes. One low, wailing cry, then she sunk down beside him, her lips pressing his, her arms about him, her bosom to his breast. Was it a miracle wrought by love?

Only a moment thus, then she started back with a wild, choking cry, staring into the face of her husband as though she feared her brain was giving way beneath that terrible strain—for she felt his heart throbbing—she felt his breath upon her lips—both faint, but unmistakable!

Merciful heavens! he was still alive!

"Time to get up, mother?" faintly muttered the wounded ranchero, his eyes opening, his senses wandering.

But only for a brief space. The stinging pain of his wound as his uneasy motion reopened the purple lips and broke the mass of coagulated blood which had formed over it; the wild scent of the woods; the snort of the still uneasy mare and above all the gasping sobs of his wife, recalled his wandering senses, and all that had happened him came back to him like a revelation.

With a cry that was full of anger, he strove to arise, but fell back again, his eyes roving swiftly around in quest of the villain who had so foully struck him down, his hand seeking the pistol in his belt.

Mrs. Martin caught him in her arms, sobbing and laughing all in the same breath.

"Henry—husband—thank Heaven you are alive—unhurt—"

A groan, wrung from his lips by a sharp pang of pain.

"Easy, wife—I can't stand much hugging—thanks to that infernal scoundrel!" he gasped.

"His lead—went clear through me, I reckon—from the way it feels!"

The brain of his wife reeled dizzily, but she fought desperately against the feeling of deathly faintness which assailed her. His life depended upon her. She would not fail him.

"Where are you hurt, dear? It may not be so bad—"

"Bad enough," faintly muttered the ranchero, his strength failing him all at once. "Only for you and the children—I wouldn't care so much. All my life I have been only a curse to those I loved—"

Her lips touched his, and checked the gloomy self-reproach.

"The best and dearest husband and father that ever drew the breath of life, Henry!" she declared, and in her unbounded love, she firmly believed in the truth of what she uttered.

"But you must not speak. Let me look to your hurts—"

"No—you can do nothing; unless you ride back and send one of the men to me—Hebron; and tell Riley to ride for the surgeon—"

A bitter wail from her lips checked his feeble speech. His words recalled all the horrors of that night. For one instant she hesitated, in doubt whether he could endure the shock, but her brain was too confused to concoct a plausible substitute, and the truth came out almost of its own volition.

"They are dead, Henry—both murdered—"

Instead of stunning, this announcement seemed to grant him a fresh lease of life. He started up to a sitting posture.

"Dead! Then that hell-bound, Freeman—"

"No—a band of outlaws—Three-Fingered Jack, he said—"

"Who said?" he cried, almost fiercely. "My God! speak out plain, unless you want to drive me mad! What has happened? The boys dead? And Lura—the children?"

"Safe—thanks to him, to Theodore Freeman!"

With a groan that was almost a curse, Henry Martin grasped his wife's hand. Swiftly he uttered:

"Theodore Freeman shot me down, like a coward, without giving me a chance for my life. Yet you say he saved *your* lives! Where is he now?"

"At the house, or was when I left, to search for you. He told me where you lay—dead, he said. He saw those men shoot you. He said they were a part of Joaquin's band, led by Three-Fingered Jack."

Like one half-asleep Mrs. Martin uttered these words. In the same strangely calm manner the ranchero listened.

"Alone with them—with Lura, poor girl!" he muttered in a husky tone. "God have mercy on her, unless I am mad—unless my eyes lied, and that assassin was not—bah! I saw him plain—ay! plainer than I see your face now! I called him by name—he spoke to me. His face, his form, his voice. He shot to kill—he has killed me! But while I have a breath of life, an ounce of strength, I will try to foil the dastardly villain!"

As he spoke, he drew his knife and slit open his clothes above the spot where the bullet had entered his breast. By that dim light, the wound could be seen as he scraped away the half-dried blood.

A faint cry from his wife, as the wound bled anew; but with a stern gesture he silenced her.

"Take my knife and open my clothes at the back. See if the bullet has come out. Be quick! That demon of evil must be foiled, even if I die at his feet!"

And, she obeyed. There was a wound where the battered lead had torn its way through the flesh, just under the ranchero's shoulder-blade. It seemed a miracle that he could have lived five minutes after receiving such a hurt; yet now, hours after, his voice was steady and firm!

"Cut off a piece of my shirt and plug up the hole—tightly. Press it in with your finger—I must keep blood enough in my veins to carry me home. Quick! even now we may be too late to save poor Lura from that fiend!"

With his own finger the ranchero stopped the hole in his breast, almost directly over his heart, not even wincing as he pressed the cloth plug firmly into his flesh. Then, by his directions, his wife formed a pad on each wound, and bound them firmly in place.

"Help me over to that rock, then bring up the mare."

His voice was husky and weak, but his spirit was never stronger. Knowing that the villain who had so cruelly shot him down, was left alone with the pride of his heart, he feared the worst. And though he died on the road, he would not fail while the faintest breath of life remained.

Like one acting in a dream, Mrs. Martin obeyed him. By leaning heavily on her, Henry Martin managed to arise and stagger over to a flat rock which lay on the other side of the road.

"Keep me up—so! Now bring up the mare, quick!"

With greater ease than he had dared hope for, the ranchero managed to climb into the saddle while his wife held the uneasy animal by

the head. The more he moved, the greater seemed his strength. Was it but the final flaring up of the flame, ere it went out altogether?

"Heaven forbid!" he muttered, as this fear occurred to him. "God grant me strength enough to reach the end, to save *her* and punish *him*, then I care little how soon the lamp goes out forever!"

By his direction Mrs. Martin mounted behind him and steadied him in the saddle with her arms. He gave the mare loose reins and urged her on at full speed.

She ran low and level, easy almost as the swaying of a hammock in the breeze, for the ranchero had chosen her himself for his loved wife's use, yet each springy leap seemed to press a poniard through his heart. The pain was excruciating. Had naught save his own life been at stake, he could not have borne the torture for a single minute, but for *her* sake, his idolized child, he ground his teeth together and urged the good mare on at the top of her speed. And right nobly did the brave creature respond. Never before had she covered the same distance in less time, even though she was acutely weighted.

Straight up to the front door he raced, just as he had done once before on that never-to-be-forgotten night. He no longer felt his wound. His strength returned to him as if by magic, and he leaped from the saddle to the veranda, entering the house and rushing up the stairs, just as Raymon Salcedo and Lura, alarmed by the swift thud of horse-boots, came out of the chamber upon the landing.

The dim rays of a candle streamed out from the room, and fell full upon the white, ghastly countenance of the ranchero. The assassin instantly recognized him, and for one breath he was paralyzed. Surely he had slain this man! Was it an avenging ghost?

"Devil—bound of hell!" snarled Henry Martin, raising his revolver. "Thank Heaven! I am in time to save my child!"

As he spoke, he pulled trigger, the silver head bearing full upon the brain of the paralyzed villain. Death seemed inevitable, but Susan shields his own, and Raymon Salcedo had not yet run his full course.

The hammer fell, but the faithless cap failed to explode!

Before the ranchero could recover his weapon, Dirty Dick flew up the stairs, and the brass-bound butt of his heavy pistol crashed down on the head of the ranchero, telling him like an ox stricken by the pole-ax of the butcher.

"Skin out while ye kin, boss! hell's to pay!" he screamed, leaping over the body of the unfortunate man and gaining the side of his master. "The old woman's come, an' Lord knows who all! Skin out, or we'll all two loth on us full camp!"

For that brief space, Lura had been like one suddenly petrified. She had believed her father dead—murdered by the outlaws under Three-Fingered Jack, as her false lover declared so solemnly. She saw him here, alive; then saw him fall again beneath that crushing blow.

With a wild scream of bitter anguish, she started toward him, only to be caught in the arms of Raymon Salcedo and forcibly restrained. Despite her struggles, he bore her back into the little chamber.

Once more the scales fell from her eyes, this time forever.

The mute horror and craven superstition which she saw upon the face of him who had so cruelly deceived her, the foul blow of the man whom he called his friend, the excited words which poured from the lips of Dirty Dick—all these were proofs undeniable, and for the first time she saw this man in his true colors, in all his vile wickedness.

"Release me!" she panted, struggling desperately to free herself from his now death-grip. "I know you now! You tried to murder him—you *have* murdered him!"

"Look out! the old she-cat's comin'!" muttered Dirty Dick, leaping behind the half-open door.

Raymon Salcedo faced the entrance, still holding Lura, his knife flashing in the candle-light, his handsome face transformed to the hideous visage of a veritable fiend. He raised his weapon threateningly, as Mrs. Martin darted into the room, but there was no need for him to use the steel, for his benchmark spared him that trouble.

With a swift leap, he was beside her. Again that crushing stroke, and once more a victim fell, without gasp or groan.

"Come—'tain't no time for foolin'!" he cried. "Take the gal, ef ye can't b'ar to leave her ahind—but *come*!"

"No—kill me, even as you have murdered them!" panted Lura, fighting desperately to free herself. "I'll not go alive—"

"So be it, then, little fool!" the arch-villain hissed, and raising his clinched fist in the air, he struck the poor girl a cruel blow full upon the temple.

A gasping moan, then she hung a lifeless weight upon his arm.

"Lead the way, Dick!" he cried, hoarsely. "If any one gets in the way, shoot quick—and shoot to kill!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A RIDE FOR LIFE.

MAD with terror, the outlaw rushed from the house, only to be shot down by the yelling company of Vigilantes under lead of John Lynch. Dividing as they neared the ranch, and riding around in both directions so as to thoroughly surround the house, they were just in time to see the thoroughly demoralized road-agents break cover.

Like a sheet of fire their revolvers spoke. Death groans and yells of agony rent the air, and as though stricken down by a thunderbolt, the fleeing rascals fell, leaving not one of their number upright on the blood-stained ground!

Of the entire party, Three-Fingered Jack alone retained coolness enough to plot for an escape. He saw that all the flight was driven out of his men by that wild, stern cheer and the sanguinary orders which bore it company. He knew that it would be a mad flight, only to end in a massacre. He saw that the Vigilantes were separating to surround the building, in accordance with the orders of their leader, and he saw that there was a ghost of a chance for him, even yet, if he retained his coolness.

His was the voice that bade the terrified outlaws make their escape by the rear—he one of the first to rush against the door and drive it splintering from its hinges. But he went no further in that direction.

He seemed to stumble and fall, even while bidding his fellows run for dear life. They obeyed, and ran to death; all save two of the number falling at the first volley to arise no more.

Three-Fingered Jack turned back, leaped down the cellar stairs and left the underground apartment by means of the window from which he and his mates had cut the bars. This carried him out under the veranda which, as before stated, was built clear of the ground, supported by stout stone pillars.

That death volley was ringing in his ears as he peered forth from his covert, but if remorse or regret ever entered the soul of this blood-demon it was not now. He had no thoughts for his late comrades—he only considered his own chances of escaping death by bullet or rope.

A hot curse hissed through his snaggled-toothed jaws as he saw that his hopes had not been wholly carried out. He believed that when his fellows broke away, the entire company of Vigilantes would hasten in pursuit of them, leaving this side of the house unguarded, for a few moments, at least—long enough for him to steal forth and reach the nearest cover, from whence it would be no very difficult matter for him to regain the spot where their horses had been left.

Unluckily for his hopes, there were several old soldiers among the company headed by John Lynch, who knew how to obey orders, and while all but them rode furiously on to join in sport, when the fire told them that the hated enemy had broken cover, two men halted in front of the veranda, and were just dismounting to use their animals as a barricade against possible shots, when Manuel Garcia glared out upon them.

He dared lose no more time. In flight alone could he hope to escape the death his bloody crimes so richly merited. He knew that every portion of the house, every yard of cover about it would be rigidly searched. He could not hope to lie hidden there. There was only one chance left him, and that chance he immediately embraced.

Only a few yards of space separated him from the two guards, and though the darkness beneath the veranda made it impossible for him to distinguish the sights on his revolver, he was a natural pistol-shot, and as he covered the man nearest him and pulled trigger, the unfortunate fellow pitched heavily to the ground, stone dead, a bullet through his brain.

Active as a cat, Three-Fingered Jack scrambled out from under the veranda, and before the snorting horse could shake off the death-gripe which was fastened on its bridle reins, the outlaw leaped clear of the ground and was seated firmly in the saddle.

So rapidly did all this transpire, that the infamous outlaw was mounted almost before the second guard could realize that danger threatened, or from whence it came.

Then he acted promptly enough, but fate was opposed to him, and his time had come. The two pistols had exploded as with one report, but while Three-Fingered Jack simply swayed to one side as a bullet grazed his ribs, the Vigilante flung up his arms and fell backward, a jet of blood leaping from over his heart, falling upon and staining the neck of his white horse scarlet.

Three-Fingered Jack wheeled his horse and dashed away, plying his bare feet as though the customary spurs still armed them. But he was not to escape so easily.

All but two of his comrades in crime had fallen before that first volley, dead or disabled. Those two also fell, but they were only slightly wounded, and almost immediately recovered their feet. But brief as the time thus consumed, the Vigilantes, unable to check their excited steeds at once, had overridden the fallen men.

Mad with terror, thinking only of flight, though escape was already impossible under the circumstances, the two outlaws fled at top speed away from where their enemies were thickest, this change of course carrying them back past the house and in full view of Three-Fingered Jack, just as he had wheeled his horse in flight.

Only for that curious circumstance, he might have gotten off wholly unscathed, for in that exciting moment, none of the Vigilantes noticed the death-shots on that side of the building. But now the Vigilantes saw him, and at once recognized him as a fugitive. One of their party would not be riding so furiously, in that direction.

"Tis Joaquin! Take him, dead or alive!" shouted John Lynch, deceived, perhaps, by the burning hatred which he now felt for his former friend and partner—the foul assassin of his dearly loved brother.

The pistols kept up a constant cracking. Jets of flame were shooting out over each horse's head. First one and then the other of the fugitives on foot fell, each with wounds deep and numerous enough to let out a score of lives.

Madly Three-Fingered Jack rode, madly John Lynch pursued him. Rapidly the pistols of the avenger spoke. Twice the outlaw felt the lead bite his person, but each time his life was left untouched.

He felt his horse give a spasmodic leap, accompanied by a wild snort of pain, and the instinct of a true-born horseman told him that the poor creature had received its death-wound.

From the first he had headed direct for the spot where the road-agents had left their animals in concealment when they stole upon Dick Hebron and Van Riley. Once there, with the pick of those fresh mounts, he believed that his lucky star would carry him through this scrape, even as it had many an other, scarcely less desperate.

"With a hissing curse, he drew his blood-stained knife and plunged it repeatedly into the haunches of his failing steed. Snorting with pain, the tortured creature rallied and under the cruel spur, sped over the ground with frantic bounds.

Fortunately for him the distance was not great, else his bloody trail would have ended that night. As it was, his horse plunged forward, dying, just as the place of concealment was reached, but Three-Fingered Jack had ridden more than one horse to death, and recognizing the symptoms, he cleared his feet and escaped being crushed by the fall, rebounding like a cat as he struck the ground.

His mind had been fixed on Golden Girl, knowing her speed and bottom from popular report, but he knew that his pursuers were too hard on his heels for him to lose an instant, and the bay mare was tethered at the further end of the drove.

With a single leap he landed in the saddle of his own beast, an animal which he knew had few superiors in a long and hard race, slashed the lasso with his knife, then plunged into the bushes again just as John Lynch came up.

"Take fresh horses and follow, boys!" he shouted, leaping from the saddle of his panting beast and seizing Golden Girl. "A thousand dollars from my own pocket to the one who takes that devil, dead or alive!"

Three-Fingered Jack heard those words, and his teeth showed wolfishly beneath his scraggy mustache. He knew that it was to be a race for life or death now. If only they overlooked Golden Girl—or if her wonderful qualities had been overstated! He had little fear of the others. The horse he now bestrode was the superior of them all.

Through the bushes, out into the road, down which he raced at breakneck speed, to get outside of pistol range before his pursuers should again sight him. And he succeeded in this, though a deep, ugly curse told that he recognized Golden Girl in the animal ridden by the foremost Vigilante.

"For life, now, Padre Jurata!" he muttered, addressing the noble animal between his thighs—far too noble to bear the title of the cruel, blood-stained monk. "Leave those devils behind, and you shall eat your grain out of a golden measure, by the light of a dozen wax candles!"

A short neigh came back as the intelligent creature heard the voice of its master, and then the race swept on—on at a pace that could not last long—the stakes being the highest that can be hung in the balance.

Straight on down the road, Three-Fingered Jack letting his horse out to the utmost, frequently glancing back to mark the result, for he is measuring the speed of Golden Girl.

Darker grows his face, curse after curse comes snarling through his tobacco-stained teeth, for he sees that the bay mare is steadily if slowly gaining upon him. This, too, with a by-no-means skillful rider upon her back. And proud as he had been of Padre Jurata, Three-Fingered Jack cursed him now, for he knew that his superior had been found—that with a rider as skillful as he himself was, on her back, to aid rather than hamper her, the race would have ended ere this.

The road he was following would lead him

direct into Marysville, where he would almost certainly be cut off or overtaken. It was too smooth riding there. His only hope lay in a more broken trail. An expert in all sorts of rough riding, with a horse well versed in the art, he felt that he would possess an advantage over Golden Girl, which he lacked here.

He turned into the Crooked Valley trail, and after him dashed John Lynch, yelling loudly to guide those of his men whom they had both distanced, making up in pluck what he lacked in riding skill.

A cruel smile curled the thin lips of Three-Fingered Jack, as he once more glanced back, and saw that the rider of Golden Girl alone was in sight, though he knew that the scouts of the miner would guide them upon the new trail. But he knew now that among the rest there were no horses to compare with Padre Jurata and Golden Girl. If he could dispose of that one enemy, and secure his mount, he could readily elude the other.

Gripping the bridle-reins between his teeth, and letting his good horse pick its own way along the narrow, winding trail, he drew his revolver and felt for his ammunition pouch.

A snarling curse announced the discovery that it was missing! Worse than that, his second pistol had fallen from its scabbard some time since leaving the ranch. And to cap all, he found on feeling that only two charges remained in the weapon he held!

Good shot as he was, he feared to risk his life on those two bits of lead, against such a determined enemy as John Lynch had shown himself. Should he miss—and that might easily be the case, at a flying target over such rough ground—the result would almost surely be fatal.

"May the devil trip him up and break his neck—that or the mare's—or both!" was his snarling comment, as he once more glanced back and saw John Lynch coming on, caring naught for the double risk he was running, seeing only the fugitive before him, thinking only of overtaking—as he still believed—the assassin of his brother.

At regular intervals he uttered a loud shout to guide those behind him, and Three-Fingered Jack, as he crossed a rise in the trail, could just distinguish a number of horsemen riding furiously along in pursuit.

In hopes of contributing to his pious wish, Manuel Garcia left the trail and struck up the slope to the still more broken ground above. Confident in his own skill as a rock-rider, he hoped to see Lynch cripple both his mare and himself in essaying to follow.

A mocking laugh floated back over his shoulder as he saw the sturdy miner unhesitatingly following in his tracks.

For answer came a pistol-shot, and Three-Fingered Jack laughed no more as he heard the ragged lead hum viciously past him. Golden Girl was gaining ground!

For five minutes more the outlaw devoted his whole attention to the task before him, aiding his horse with hand and rein, calling his utmost skill into requisition. Although this portion of the hills was almost a *terra incognita* to him, he lost not a moment of time, not a foot of ground, in shaping his course. He was guided by a sort of subtle instinct, as rare as it is difficult to account for or explain.

At the end of that time he glanced back. John Lynch was still in sight, but he had lost considerable ground, through lack of skill as a rock-rider. But Golden Girl was proving herself as plucky as Padre Jurata, and to the full as stanch as she was fleet-footed.

That was an unlucky glance back for Three-Fingered Jack. His horse stepped on a loose stone and stumbled, not seriously, but enough to throw the outlaw off his balance. Instinctively he jerked upon the reins to keep his horse from falling, but the heavy lurching of his body, added to the stumble and the sideways strain on the reins, caused Padre Jurata to fall heavily.

By natural instinct Three-Fingered Jack saved himself from serious injury, and snarling out furious curses, aided his horse to arise. The same instant he was settled in the saddle, and racing on once more.

For a brief space, as he closely watched the action of his horse, Garcia believed that no harm had come of the fall, other than the loss of a few yards of ground, which he could easily recover. But he was congratulating himself too soon.

Padre Jurata began to limp, and then Three-Fingered Jack knew that he was seriously injured, else he would never show the effects of the fall so soon, when so thoroughly warmed up.

More and more wolfish grew his countenance as he helped his good horse on, watching him closely. But he saw that the noble creature was failing—how seriously he did not fully realize until he heard that unrelenting cry behind him after an interval longer than usual—and glancing back, he beheld John Lynch coming on like fate, Golden Girl running as freely and easily as though that killing race had only just begun!

Within short pistol range, now, and more than ever eager to avenge the cruel murder of

his brother, John Lynch opened fire upon the fugitive. All around him hummed the balls, flying wide of the mark, good shot though the miner was, owing to the nature of the ground over which they were racing.

But Three-fingered Jack knew that any one of those shots might forever end his life-trail, and he resolved to kill this man who had driven him so far. Him slain, Golden Girl captured, he could leave crippled Padre Jurata to his fate, and laugh the rest of his pursuers to scorn!

Quickly reining in his steed, he made a half-turn, then leveled his revolver. Still, as he knew that his life depended upon those two bullets, he did not fire at once, as a less daring man would have done, though John Lynch, with a defiant shout, rode straight at him, firing as he came.

Crack! went the outlaw's pistol, and a yell of devilish exultation burst from his lips as he saw the sturdy miner sway in the saddle, for he felt sure that his lead had been driven home to that honest heart. But the yell was changed to a curse of snarling fury as the miner still rode on!

But one more shot! Death must follow that—the death of this relentless avenger, or else his own!

On came the miner—on until not a score of yards divided the two horsemen, one riding at breakneck speed, firing at every leap Golden Girl made, the other sitting erect with pistol following every motion of his adversary, seeming to bear a charmed life, for though the lead whistled all around him, not once was his skin broken!

Then he fired, and a scream of horrible agony followed. But it was from poor Golden Girl, not her rider!

At the critical moment the noble mare stumbled, and flinging her head up, received the lead which was intended for her rider, in her brain!

She fell, casting a shower of leaves and dust over the form of her slayer, half blinding him. He saw John Lynch touch the ground once, then seemingly rebound into the air—and the next instant a sinewy hand was clutching at his throat!

Swiftly shifting the revolver in his hand, Three-Fingered Jack dealt his adversary a terrible blow full upon the head. Without a groan, John Lynch fell back, one hand firmly grasping the outlaw's belt, as in a death-gripe.

Nearly unseated by the heavy weight so unexpectedly falling upon his middle, the outlaw strove to tear the hand away, but instead, the buckle broke, Lynch falling heavily to the ground beneath the hoofs of Padre Jurata.

Loud yells came from the brow of the hill, and looking back, Three-Fingered Jack saw that the Vigilantes were upon him.

They were too many to fight, and he was wholly unarmed now, for the empty revolver had fallen from his hand as he tried to tear away that death-gripe. There was no time for him to lean over and rob the fallen miner of his weapons. Already the bullets were whistling about his ears. An instant's delay meant death or its equivalent—capture!

Once more he turned in flight, plying heels and bridle-reins in frantic desperation. Right nobly did Padre Jurata respond. He seemed to forget his strained shoulder, his fatigue, everything, save that the life of his master now depended solely upon his exertions.

On thundered the fugitive, after him dashed the Vigilantes, wrought to fury by the fall of their leader, whom they all believed slain. Truly it was a race for life or death!

But the end was near—nearer far than the desperate fugitive then imagined, though he had not ridden a mile further when the loud, exultant yells of his pursuers caused him to cast a hasty glance over his shoulder.

He saw that he had gained rapidly upon them; they were now beyond pistol range, so that could not be the cause of their shouting so exultantly. Then, as he saw that the band was gradually spreading out, as though to intercept him in case he should attempt to veer from a straight line, a suspicion of the terrible truth burst upon him.

He was not familiar with this part of the country; had only recently come there, and all of that time had been devoted to spying upon Henry Martin and his premises. Might it not be that his further flight was checked by some—

His thoughts went no further. As his horse plunged through a dense fringe of bushes, he saw before him a yawning abyss! A canyon of unknown depth, of fully thirty feet width, and stretching away on either hand as far as the eye could reach!

Only for an instant did his hesitation last. Certain death behind—a faint chance for life ahead! And true to his bold nature, he chose the latter alternative, though to most men the bare attempt would have been worse than death itself.

He snatched off his jacket and twisted it over his horse's eyes. He had taught him to leap blindfolded, guided by the touch of the reins, and he chose this method now, lest Padre Ju-

rata cowed, by his sprained shoulder, should refuse the leap.

A shrill, ringing yell, then the good horse is lanced forward. A jerk on the reins, and the noble creature rises in the air like a bird, shooting over the dizzy chasm, but not entirely clearing it! Instead, his fore-feet strike the level, his hind-feet sink below, and pound against the rock wall!

CHAPTER XIX.

LOST, STARVING AND MAD.

WHILE Padre Jurata was yet in mid-air, Three-Fingered Jack saw that the poor creature would fail to make a successful landing, and for the first time since that wild race began, he completely relinquished all hope.

It seemed doubly hard to die now, after having taken such desperate chances, and having made such a good fight for life. And they would triumph over his mangled remains—that was the bitterest thought of all!

It is wonderful how much a brain can grasp in the fraction of a second. Not only did Three-Fingered Jack have time to feel thus, while his good horse was shooting over the canyon, but he saw the waiting rocks below him, and even fancied he could see himself and Padre Jurata flying down to their deadly embrace, turning over and over in the air as they fell—to meet death together!

Not a second—then came that frightful shock. A shock so heavy that Padre Jurata was paralyzed in his hind parts. A wild, snorting scream of mingled pain and fear, as he fought desperately with head and fore-legs to secure a footing. But all was in vain. Not for an instant was there hope for him, but even if there had been, the action of Three-Fingered Jack would have certainly destroyed it.

Mechanically bracing himself against the shock which he saw would be terrible, the outlaw still clung to the saddle after it was over. For a brief space he fancied that Padre Jurata would recover himself, but then he saw that this was impossible, and kicking his bare feet from the stirrups, he scrambled upon the saddle; using his long, bony toes as dexterously as any ape, then made a wild leap over the tossing head of his struggling horse.

Unluckily for himself, Three-Fingered Jack was struck on the ankles by the horse as it flung its head up when hurled backward by that desperate leap. His balance was destroyed, and he fell in an awkward heap upon the rocks.

He heard a horrible scream come back from the canyon, cut short by a heavy, sickening thud as Padre Jurata found the end of his earthly trail on the cruel rocks below.

He heard the loud yells of the Vigilantes as they came spurring madly on, and he knew that unless he could gain cover, his body would never be able to contain all the lead which they would hail upon him the instant he was discovered.

A painful effort—then he sunk down behind a low boulder, above which hung a stunted juniper bush.

None too soon did he find concealment, for barely ten seconds later, the foremost riders among the Vigilantes burst through the belt of bushes and drew rein almost on the very brink of the canyon. Indeed, had it been broad daylight, some among those keen eyes could not well have avoided noticing the juniper bush quivering as the panting outlaw fell against its stem.

"Escaped, by —!" cried one of the party, wrenching up his horse and glancing swiftly from right to left, in quest of the fugitive.

"Escaped, by death!" parodied one of his mates, with a short laugh, leaping from the saddle. "I've heard that horrible yell before now, and I'll bet my boots that—Ha! I told you so!" eagerly craning over the chasm. "Yonder they lie—man and horse! Poor Lynch is avenged without our aid!"

Eagerly his comrades flocked to the edge of the canyon. Far below, lying where a ray of moonlight just touched its head and neck, they could distinguish the dead horse. Not one of them all doubted but that the bold rider lay there also. How could he escape when the horse died in that manner?

"Poor Lynch swore that he'd never cease hunting until he had run Joaquin to death, to avenge his brother," uttered one deep voice. "There lies Joaquin—but poor old John will never know how well he kept his oath!"

A grim smile crept over Three-Fingered Jack's wolfish countenance as he lay under the juniper bush and heard these words. Let them hug the fond delusion to their bosoms while they could; but had he been armed—had he his trusty revolvers in his grasp, well loaded, he would have opened their eyes, even if they were a dozen to one, and others constantly coming up. Against an army he could hold his own, with such a barrier between.

"Ah!" he grated with a low, wolfish snarl, his eyes glowing greenly as he peered out from his covert. "If I only had my tools, how I would set you all to dancing the dance of death! Laugh and joke now—it is your turn! But look out! My time will come next. And then—I'll cut and slash—I'll drink your hot blood, and

chew your quivering hearts—Thousand devils! that man—alive!"

The last words burst from his lips with a distinctness that might have proved fatal, had not the Vigilantes themselves set up a loud, glad shout that drowned his cry. At the same instant, he and they discovered John Lynch, somewhat the worse for wear, his clothes almost all stripped from his person, hatless, the blood trickling over his face from the place where Three-Fingered Jack had laid his skull bare with that crushing blow—but still alive and interviewable condition.

Eagerly the Vigilantes crowded around their leader, pouring their heartfelt congratulations upon him, but the sturdy miner shook them off as he glanced keenly around.

"Where is he? You haven't let him escape, after all?"

"No—he rode to death," was the gay response. "Take a squint over the edge, Lynch, and you'll see all that remains of Joaquin and his horse!"

A short, hard laugh came from the miner's lips.

"Dead maybe, but not Joaquin—"

He was cut short by a chorus of surprised cries.

"A worse devil than even Joaquin, if that can be. I thought it was my man, up to the time when he killed my horse and I closed with the rascal, but then I saw my mistake. It was the rascal they call Three-fingered Jack. But you are sure that he fell? I can make out the horse, but not the man. Maybe he jumped off, when he saw that his horse must go over. Scatter and search close! The hound is as cunning as Satan himself!"

Snarling in an undertone, and champing his teeth until he more nearly than ever resembled the wolf to which he had been so often likened, Three-fingered Jack watched the Vigilantes scatter and begin to search for him.

This was more than he had calculated upon. He naturally thought they would accept the fact of his death without question, and turn back, leaving him free to go where he pleased.

"Devil grill that hound alive!" he muttered, glaring at John Lynch, who still peered down the dizzy depth, waiting for the moving moon to uncover the bloody mass more fully. "They may hit on the truth—they may be able to cross the canyon where it is narrow, either above or below, and then—"

Not even to himself did he care to finish the sentence.

"Boys," abruptly called out Lynch, "let's make sure work of it while we're about it. Some of you collect your lassoes and knot them together, while the rest continue the search. By lowering a man down yonder, we can find out whether the rascal was killed. That will save time, and tell us just how to work afterward."

Three-fingered Jack did not wait to witness the result. To move was to invite discovery, but to lie still was certain death. He was aching in every bone and joint. He knew that he had been seriously injured by his fall. He found that his left leg was broken at the ankle, from the exquisite pain which accompanied his slightest motion, but life was sweet even to that crime-hardened rascal, and grating his teeth until it seemed as though they must crumble beneath the savage pressure, he crawled under the juniper bush, and with many a backward glance, his flesh quivering with the expectation of being greeted by an avenging shower of lead, dragged himself away from the canyon.

Not until a slight rise in the ground completely hid him from view of the Vigilantes, did he draw a free breath. But he did not pause, though great drops of agony stood out like tears upon his brow. Ere long the truth would be discovered, and then his trail would be diligently sought for by those human bloodhounds. If overtaken, he must die. His crimes were too numerous and of too black a dye for hope of mercy. And unarmed, even his knife gone with the belt which John Lynch had torn from about his waist in falling, he could not fight them.

It may well be doubted whether the tortures which Three-fingered Jack suffered during the remainder of that night, were not worse than death itself. He could only keep himself going by thinking of the deadly satisfaction which he would have when he had fairly escaped and recovered his usual powers. How he would revel in bloodshed! For each pang he now suffered, he would exact a life.

How well he kept that malignant oath, let the blood-stained annals of California show!

When the sun rose, his strength failed him, and crawling into a crevice in the rocks, covering himself over with dry grass which he had collected for that purpose, he fell into a sleep that was the stupor of complete exhaustion.

It was night again when consciousness returned to him. The sense of sight, of motion, the power of feeling—but hardly that of reason.

His brain was strangely confused. He saw things as through a piece of dingy, warped glass. All about him danced and grimaced weird and fantastic creatures—the fancies of a

diseased brain. If not crazy then, Three-Fingered Jack was in a fair way of speedily becoming mad.

For a time he cowered there in his covert, speechless with horror, shutting his eyes and shrinking back, trembling in every fiber as one of those frightful visions drew nearer to him, only to open them again and drink in anew the fantastic display, forced by a burning curiosity which he could not control.

At last he could endure it no longer, and rising, fled through the rock-hills with a speed lent by fright, yelling loudly, fairly beside himself.

All that day and the second night he wandered aimlessly on, now and then falling from utter exhaustion, lying for hours at a time without sense or motion, only to be again roused up by those frightful, grimacing phantoms.

When the second day dawned, his brain was clear and these fantastic creatures no longer disturbed him. His temporary madness had yielded to hunger and thirst, and weakness of body.

In vain he tried to recognize the landmarks around him. He had wandered many miles during that spell of madness, and now found himself in a part of the country entirely new to him.

His throat was parched, his swollen tongue had grown too large for his mouth, and now lolled over his cracked and blackened lips. His injured ankle was very painful, causing him exquisite torture with the slightest movement, but he knew that he must find water and food of some sort, or perish miserably.

It was a bleak and barren district, high and rocky. To find water he must reach a less elevated region, and suffering the tortures of the damned, he dragged himself on, foot by foot, yard upon yard, mile after mile.

It was growing dusk when he saw, far below him, a belt of bushes and trees which instinct told him must border a stream of some sort. Perishing with thirst, his fatigue, his injuries, all were forgotten, and rising upon his feet for the first time since his madness left him, Three-Fingered Jack rushed recklessly toward the nearest point where he hoped to find the life-restoring liquid.

He gained and plunged through the undergrowth. His hopes had not deceived him. A mountain brook was flowing rapidly over its pebbly bed, and staggering down the bank with a hoarse cry that had little human in it, he fell face foremost into the stream.

Luckily for him the water at that point was very shallow, else he might have drowned. And still more luckily, his head came in contact with a rough stone as he fell, else he would have killed himself by drinking. As it was, he only swallowed a slight quantity of the clear, cold water before his senses left him.

Far into the night he returned to consciousness, and drank moderately before painfully dragging himself out of the water. His raging thirst had been quenched by absorption during the hours his body lay in the stream.

He slept quietly until the new day dawned, when he awoke to suffer fresh tortures, not thirst, but the growing pangs of hunger, which he vainly sought to appease by chewing leaves and twigs while painfully searching for more substantial food. Time and again he saw birds and squirrels and snakes, but they were all equally beyond his reach. He gnashed his teeth in speechless rage as he thought how a frowning fate had disarmed him. He would have given his good right hand then for a loaded revolver, or even a knife!

Slowly the hours crept away, each one an age of torture, each one increasing the gnawing pain, each one lessening his strength, and with it his chances for life, until at length he fell forward upon his face, worn out—dying, as he believed.

But fate seemed tired of frowning upon him. With a gasping snort, a huge elk leaped into the little clearing, then fell in a heap, not a score yards from where lay the fainting outlaw.

The sound aroused him, and he raised his head, just in time to see two large gray wolves leap upon the struggling elk, one tearing at its heaving flank, the other with long fangs fixed in its throat, thirstily drinking its life-blood!

As by magic, Three-Fingered Jack leaped to his feet, his sunken eyes protruding and aglow with a savage delight.

Here was food enough for a regiment—but the wolves?

Startled by his sudden uprising, they relinquished their dying prey and retreated a few steps, snarling and showing their teeth.

Forgetting his weak state, his being without arms, remembering only his hunger, Three-Fingered Jack stooped, and picking up a couple of heavy stones, threw the first at the nearest wolf.

It was hit, but instead of retreating, it leaped forward, straight at the throat of the haggard wretch. Swiftly he cast the second stone. More by chance than aught else, a sharp point struck the furious animal between the eyes, crushing its skull, and it fell in a writhing heap, dying!

Three-Fingered Jack stooped for another stone, for he saw that, far from being frightened off by the death of its mate, the other wolf was leaping upon him, but ere he could rise again, the heavy body struck and knocked him down.

Instinctively he grappled with the snarling creature, his bony fingers meeting around its throat, and the two wild beasts rolled over and over the ground in a death-grapple.

Fiercer than the wolf now snarled the human wolf. His strength seemed restored in ten-fold degree, and while his fingers throttled the beast, while its long claws tore clothes and flesh into shreds, he bit at the grisly jaws and tore the gray hide with his pointed teeth with the deadly fury of a bloodhound!

CHAPTER XX.

JOAQUIN DEALS ANOTHER BLOW.

ON that same eventful night which witnessed so many startling scenes in and about the Martin ranch, Joaquin himself was busy in another quarter, else much of what has already been related might never have come to pass.

In the report delivered by Pedro Gonzales, the favorite spy of Joaquin Murieta, it will be remembered that particular mention was made of an enterprise engineered to success by Parson Thibeau, and known throughout that region as the "Golden Gulch Mine." It may be recalled, too, that this was one of the points in which Joaquin proposed to strike his bitter enemy, who loved gold hardly second to his own life, and with whom this venture was an especial pride.

Taking with him only one trusty man—and by the way it is a little remarkable, considering that ever since he "went to the bad" Joaquin cursed everything American as bitterly as he before then praised the same, that there should not only be a pure-bred American in his band, but that he should select that man for his companion and *aide* on this occasion—known only by the name of Mountain Jim.

From an awkward habit which Mountain Jim had of dragging one foot behind the other as he walked, it was shrewdly supposed that, in his day, he had been of more service to some of the States than marked his career in California.

He was undeniably an American, and a full-blooded Yankee at that, but the last exploit of his before offering himself as a candidate for admission into the road-agent band, strongly recommended him to Joaquin.

Caught in the act of "lifting" a bag of dust from a comrade, Mountain Jim would assuredly have "pulled hemp," only for the intercession of the man whom he had attempted to rob. Instead, he was tied up and severely flogged, then turned loose and bidden never show his face again in that section, on penalty of death.

Not a word nor a moan did he utter, though the red blood was trickling from his bruised back down to his heels. He put on his clothes and buckled on his belt.

Then there was a "circus." With a revolver in each hand, Mountain Jim "ran a muck." The mate, who suggested a flogging instead of hanging, as the only hope of saving the life of his friend, fell first; but when all was over, he had half a dozen others to keep him company "over the range," while Mountain Jim was riding away on a borrowed horse, laughing at all pursuit.

The close resemblance to his own black experience, no doubt, made Joaquin receive Mountain Jim into favor, and so far as he was concerned, to break his vow of death to all of the American race who might come within the swing of his blood-stained hand. But be that as it may, Mountain Jim was his chosen comrade on this occasion, when he dealt the deadliest blow of all his strange career, up to that date—a blow which spread his name and ominous fame over the entire Pacific Slope with the rapidity of wild fire.

The day was just dawning. Crouching down amidst a tangle of rocks and shrubbery, the two outlaws peered out upon a curious scene.

A narrow valley, inclosed by high, rocky slopes, so steep and difficult of ascent that they might almost be called walls. From side to side, built at the narrowest point of the gulch, was a dam of earth, logs, rocks and brush, nearly thirty feet high, through which water leaked at a thousand different points.

From where they lay in ambush, the two road-agents could see that above this dam the water lay almost level with its crest, despite the flood which was pouring off through a side canal, cut through the hill at its lowest point. Heavy rains up in the mountains had caused this flood, so much greater than anticipated.

At a heavy cost, by unrelenting labor and a great risk, this dam and canal had been constructed, under the direct supervision of Parson Thibeau. Dearly as he loved gold, he spent it free as water then, for he knew that success would repay him a thousand-fold. He, and others before him, had tried the same experiment, on smaller scales, laying the beds of small streams bare for the time being, then clearing out the soil to bed-rock, to be washed out at leisure.

On this occasion, Parson Thibeau meant to make the diggings a permanent thing. Aided by the canal, through which all the surplus water could escape, he calculated that the dam as built would last until at least his end was gained.

Before a pick was struck or a shovel filled, the astute Parson had the whole thing in his own hands. He hired scores of men for a certain length of time, and had each man sign over to him a claim which had been duly recorded in their names. By this means, he held the entire valley below the point where the dam was to be built, or nearly five miles in length. All knew that these claims would be very valuable could they only be got at to work them, but all laughed at the idea of digging gold in such a torrent, and Parson Thibeau had no trouble in buying the claims at a low price.

Then he set to work, and the result was almost marvelous. But in one sense the popular attention thus drawn to him was ruinous to the Parson, since it fixed the eye of Joaquin upon him as a profitable one to pluck, and ended in his cunning disguise being penetrated.

All day the diggings thus laid bare were worked at an immense profit, while the entire claim was patrolled at night, to prevent thieving or injury to the dam.

All this the spy reported to Joaquin, and it was on this basis that he calculated his work. But when he came to visit the spot, he found an awkward change that threatened to ruin his plans.

Alarmed by the freshet, fearing the destruction of the dam, the man in charge during Parson Thibeau's absence, set his men at work in two shifts, each taking half of the day and half of the night, working constantly save during an hour for meals and rest, removing the pay dirt and stacking it up in the various side valleys which ran into the main hollow. In addition, trusty men were placed to watch the dam, and give timely warning should it show any symptoms of giving way before the enormous pressure brought to bear upon it by the water.

Owing to this, and the huge bonfires which were built to give the night workmen light, Joaquin found it a delicate and dangerous piece of work to carry out his scheme.

This was not only the destruction of the dam, but also the death of the workmen, among whom he recognized several who had taken part in one or the other of the three black outrages which made him an outlaw and assassin.

For an hour or more, he lay in ambush and watched the wild, strange scene by the red glow of the crackling fires. Then his plans were reshaped, and with Mountain Jim he stole away to the cut through which the canal ran.

Here the work was easy, owing to the nature of the ground.

Just behind a huge mass of rock, holes were dug and cartridges of powder placed, fuses connected, and the ground tramped firmly above the mine. By an explosion of this sort, not only the rock itself, but great quantities of earth would be cast down into the canal, completely filling it up.

This abrupt closing of the "safety valve" alone would insure the ruin of the diggings and the destruction of the dam, with the flood at such a height, but Joaquin wanted more, and so they left the canal and crept back to the valley.

An armed man was stationed at each end of the dam, pacing from the bank out several rods, then back again, closely watching its condition, ready to give the signal for flight by a pistol shot.

Where the danger was so great, there was no hope of their relaxing their vigilance, while the fires below lighted up the scene with tolerably distinctness.

Yet Joaquin was not a man whom common obstacles could daunt, and he deliberately set about gaining his ends.

Leaving his fire-arms behind him, together with nearly all of his clothes, he took his knife between his teeth and crawled down to the water, above the dam. Here he was in the shadow, and swam along until he reached the dam, sinking low in a hollow between a log and a boulder, waiting until the guard should return from his slow walk out from shore.

Twice he suffered him to pass without molestation, because he saw that the fellow held a cocked revolver, with finger on trigger, and he feared that the weapon would be discharged, even should the guard fall dead before his first blow.

Then, with a happy thought, he drew a gold "slug" from his pocket, and laid it where the rays of the moon fell full upon its broad face, close to where he crouched, knife in hand.

Back came the guard—to his death! His anxious eye caught the bright glimmer of gold, and he stooped to pick it up, supposing it had dropped from his pocket.

As he did so one hand drove a keen blade down through his neck, and another dragged him headlong into the mud and water! Not a groan or cry came from his lips, but in falling, his heavy limbs made a loud splashing in the water, that attracted the notice of his fellow guard.

"Hello, mate! what's up?" he cried out loudly.

Joaquin lay low, holding the throat of his victim in a fierce grasp, breathless, his eyes glowing like living coals.

He could hear the excited exclamations from the workers below, who had been startled by the shout of the guard. And he knew that not only the success of his daring scheme, but his own life hung trembling in the balance.

"Tain't nothin', boys!" cried the other guard as the diggers below gave signs of a hasty stampede. "Dan's all right—but I reckon Johnny hes went to sleep an' tumbled into the drink—"

At that instant Joaquin was amazed to see a hatless dripping figure scramble up out of the water on the dam!

A torrent of husky curses, choking and strangling, amid which could be distinguished the words:

"Stepped on a durned snake—foot slipped an' in I tumbled—cuss the luck!" and another volley of curses brought up the rear.

Joaquin laughed softly as he heard the loud laughter from those below, for he now recognized Mountain Jim, who, by a ruse as admirable in its conception as it was swift in its execution, had saved the day.

When satisfied that the guard was dead, Joaquin wedged the body down among the brush, then bidding his mate keep up his new character, he made his way back to land and returned with a heavy stone jug full of powder.

This he handed to Jim, who, as guard, could manage it easily enough under pretense of inspecting the dam, wedged it among the logs, uncoiling the long fuse which entered the jug through the cork.

By the time this was done, the gray light in the east heralded the birth of a new day, and under pretense of lighting his pipe Mountain Jim ignited the end of the fuse, which was measured to burn just ten minutes.

Then, shouting to his fellow guard that he would be back in a minute, the cunning rascal left the dam and rejoined Joaquin among the rocks, where he had retreated at once on giving Mountain Jim the powder jug.

One glance they took at the score of men so busily toiling in the mud and wet below, then Joaquin said:

"Run over and fire your mine. By the time it goes off, there will be the devil to pay here. Off with you!"

The Yankee obeyed, while Joaquin remained in ambush, his eyes glowing, his face wreathed with smiles of ferocious exultation as he thought of the ruin and desolation which was so soon to burst upon those unsuspecting wretches toiling in the death-trap below him.

A few minutes of impatient waiting, then there came a dull, smothered explosion, followed by a thundering crash!

For an instant, the diggers were dumfounded, for they saw that the dam was still intact—but then the guard stationed on the further end of the dam, cried in great excitement:

"It's the canal! The hull side o' the hill hes slipped down—the water is choked off—the dam 'll go next! Look out fer yerselves, down below!"

A snarling curse of fury burst from the lips of the outlaw, but it was drowned by the wild cries and shouts of the terrified diggers below the dam, who dropped their tools and rushed madly for the steep banks on either side.

He believed that the fuse had gone out or else been extinguished by water dropping on it, and rendered thoroughly reckless, he leaped up from his ambush and poured a deadly storm of bullets among the nearest of the miners.

And then—a heavy explosion that dashed into spray the water that already began to run over the dam, as the huge wave caused by the fall of the rock and earth into the canal swept across the pond—a rending of timbers—a dull groaning and grinding of rocks—all swallowed up by the frightful roar as the dam burst wide open and the pent up waters leaped down the death-valley, hurling tree-trunks and huge boulders before it!

Joaquin screamed aloud in devilish joy as he saw the hapless miners go down before that horrible wall of death—but his voice was inaudible even to his own ears, so great was that frightful roar.

"Clean job!" said Mountain Jim, from his side, his voice low and awe-stricken, his face a sickly white, even his crime-hardened heart turning sick and recoiling from the frightful scene he had witnessed.

The roar was afar off now, and his voice was audible to his leader, who turned swiftly upon him, his eyes still glowing:

"Take care, my friend!" he uttered in stern warning. "You have served me well to-night, and I'd really hate to see harm befall you—but when a man enters my band, he must leave heart and conscience behind him. If you feel pity for those who fell, you may in time come to blame those who sent them out of the world—from that to treachery and betrayal is but a single step easily taken. It is a sacred rule with me to run no such chances, but to put a period after the first step. You understand?"

Mountain Jim *did* understand, and from that time until he died—which was at the end of a rope, two months after this date—he acted most carefully on the advice given him.

Luckily he did not have to reply—for to their ears came a faint cry for help, and by the gray dawn, the keen eyes of Joaquin caught sight of a human being wedged in between two rocks, high up on the hillside, a few rods down the valley, on the same side of the stream with themselves.

Again that devilish light came into his eyes, as he scrambled along the hillside until at a point almost directly above the man, who was moaning with pain.

"Help! for the love of heaven!" he gasped, huskily, his upturned face distorted and drawn with anguish.

Instead there came a hard, bitter laugh, then the words:

"You were one of those fellows at work when the dam broke?"

"Yes. The water caught me as I was climbing up the hill, and washed me in here. Help!—I cannot move—every bone in my body seems ground to powder—"

"If you are so bad off as that, wouldn't it be a waste of time and labor to extricate you?" asked the outlaw, his voice low and gentle—like the purring of a panther. "Even if you were to live, you would be a helpless cripple for life, and maybe starve to death. Better die now—"

"Don't mock me—don't joke now, while I am lying here—"

"Look at me!" hissed Joaquin, his true nature flashing forth as he recalled the past. "Am I joking? Yes! as much as you were when you came to my peaceful home on the Stanislaus, and murdered my wife, after foully outraging her—"

"Joaquin! Heaven have mercy on me now!" gasped the dying wretch, as he recognized who it was that hung over him.

"Mercy! ay! such mercy as you and the rest of that gang showed my wife—showed me!" snarled the maddened avenger, leaning forward and covering the doomed miner with a revolver. "One by one I am killing you off—it is your turn now!"

The pistol exploded. Without a groan the digger died.

NOTE.—The incident contained in this chapter is strictly true, and actually occurred just as narrated. Doubtless there are persons still living in California, or elsewhere, who can bear evidence to that fact. But one man escaped the massacre—the guard—and some idea of the terrible power of the water may be had, when some of the bodies were found fifteen miles from where the dam stood.—J. E. B., Jr.

CHAPTER XXI.

A ONE-SIDED ELOPEMENT.

WITH revolvers drawn ready for instant use, in case the necessity should arise, Dirty Dick Sleeper leaped down the stairs and out upon the veranda, closely followed as far as the front door by Raymon Salcedo, who bore the lifeless weight of the poor girl with seeming ease.

"Not a livin' critter in sight as I kin see, boss!" muttered the scout, after a swift scrutiny of their surroundings. "Ef any does turn up, leave 'im to me. Ain't no time to loaf 'round yer now! Some o' them p'izen hoss-critters may be comin' back an' drap onto us any minnit, which wouldn't be too healthy, seein' that packidge in your arms, to say nothin' o' the sight up thar!" with a short nod in the direction of the up-stairs chamber.

"You made sure work? You think they're dead?"

"I was strikin' fer you, boss," was the simple response.

"Make for the horses. Once in the saddle, we can laugh at those clumsy brutes."

Dirty Dick made no further delay, but descended from the veranda and led the way across the blood-stained, hoof-scored lawn, entering the cover beyond, closely followed by Salcedo, bearing his hapless captive, without cry of discovery, or effort at interception.

For a considerable distance they wound through the broken ground bordering the base of the range, but keeping on in the same general direction as that followed by the road leading to Marysville. Dirty Dick kept a little ahead, seemingly determined that no mishap should befall his idolized "boss" through any negligence of his.

"Thar's the critters, boss," he at length whispered, pausing until Salcedo came up and checking him. "Lay low a bit until I takes a squint ahead. It mought be some o' them p'izen critters run ag'inst the animiles, an' sot a trap to ketch the owners!"

Salcedo made no objection, not that he feared there was any such danger, but even his steel-like sinews were beginning to fail under that precious burden, and he was quite willing to pause, the more so that this long insensibility on the part of Lura Martin was beginning to alarm him.

"The devil knows I didn't mean to kill her!" he muttered, stooping and laying the helpless maiden down where a stray moonbeam found its way through an opening in the dense foliage above them. "But maybe I struck harder

than I knew. I was mad—mad to see how crooked all things were turning out, after my patient plotting and scheming."

"It's all right at this end, boss," said Dirty Dick, making his reappearance, just as Salcedo was stooping over the maiden. "Hosses jist as we left 'em. Better straddle critter—"

"Time enough. The gir's alive, but she's too great a prize to risk the loss of by more careless usage. I mean to restore her senses before we ride from here."

"Better wait until we're in healthier quarters, boss. Ef she should take a notion to screech out at the wrong minnit—an' somehow they al'ays manidge to hit the most awkwardest time o' all when they do squeal—"

The young Californian raised his hand with a quick gesture.

"That is my risk. If you are afraid, mount your horse and go. You can wait for me at the old—"

"When old Dick Sleeper gits skeered out, 'tain't you that'll kiver his trail when he's runnin' away, boss," said the scout, gruffly, it being the nearest approach to an angry retort he ever made to the worthless wretch whom he loved so strangely.

Salcedo knew that the old man must have been deeply hurt before he would say this much, but he was an absolute stranger to all generous feeling, and knowing from long experience that Dirty Dick was like a faithful dog, ready to obey the one hand whose blows were received as caresses, he spoke again:

"If you don't care to ride on ahead, suppose you steal over yonder and see if—if she is quiet."

Dirty Dick turned a shade paler, but though a more disagreeable duty could not have been assigned him, he turned without a word and set out for the clump of timber from whence, a few hours earlier on that night, had come that shriek of woman and wail of infant.

Raymon Salcedo turned his attention to Lura Martin, on whose temple was an ugly purple bruise, marking the spot where his dastardly blow had fallen. He knew that she was alive, for he could hear her heart beating, could feel the breath that came regularly from her slightly parted lips; but that strange stupor alarmed him. What if she should die on his hands?

"It would be of a piece with all my schemes of late!" he growled, now looking the utter villain he was, since there was none to read his unmasked face. "At first, all promising as any one could wish—only to turn to bitter ashes when I think to taste the fruit of my labors! If she should die, all my plotting, all my devilry has been in vain! Thousand devils curricomb that fool girl! To think that she should turn up here, with her brat, just in time to kick over my pretty castle in the air!"

He was not idle while muttering these words. He parted the maiden's lips still further, and poured a quantity of liquor down her throat. This, added to his chafing her hands and face, finally restored the poor girl to consciousness.

One instant of vague wonder in her wide open eyes—then the terrible events of that night flashed across her brain like a revelation, and with a panting cry of affright, Lura tried to arise, to flee. But a strong hand restrained her.

"Quiet—for your life, darling, no noise!" the arch villain hissed, one hand settling over her lips as he drew a revolver. "Joaquin's men are hunting us hotly—if found, death to me, and worse than death for you!"

Bewildered, she lay motionless. They both could hear a hasty step approaching the covert, but Salcedo drew a sigh of relief as Dirty Dick hastily entered the little opening.

Swift as thought a finger touched Salcedo's lips warningly. Then he said:

"Well? How did you find them? In one word."

"Didn't find 'em," was the short response. "Gone—body an' britches—leastways petticoats!"

A snarl of doubting rage burst from the young man's lips.

"True as gospel!" doggedly added Dirty Dick. "Not a sign left abind to tell that anybody hed ever tin thar, or low they manidge to git away. But gone they is, the hull outfit!"

A volley of curses so fearful, so terribly blasphemous, that the maiden shuddered and covered her face with her hands. Was this the man she had loved so madly? The soft-spoken gentleman, the tender, chivalrous lover?

Even Dirty Dick seemed stock, and hurriedly said:

"After all, what matter? What hurt kin they do you now? The old plan is knocked higher'n a kite—but you ain't lost the key, ef you don't ruin it now by slingin' words around so pesky keerless."

An enigma to the bewildered, stunned maiden, but words readily understood by the young Californian. Realizing their shrewdness, he choked down his mad rage and held it in subjection for the present.

Turning to Lura, he spoke shortly, sternly: "Lura, as I told you, we are surrounded by deadly danger. A single cry—even an incautious

word—may bring them down upon us, and prove utter ruin. We must ride fast and far to escape them. You are excited and unnerved by the unfortunate events which have taken place, but you must see that I am acting all for the best. Promise me that you will be good—that you will patiently wait for an explanation until we are out of danger—”

“Let me go to them—to mother and father. My God!” as the terrible truth flashed upon her, “you killed them—”

Swift as light his strong hand fell upon her lips, smothering the wild shriek that was bursting from them.

“If you will be such a headstrong fool!” he snarled, angrily, then adding: “Dick, bind her hands, and then prepare a gag. No more half-measures to-night for me!”

Rapidly enough the old man complied. Five minutes later the poor girl was securely bound on a grudge.

Raising her in his arms, Raymon Salcedo passed through the undergrowth until beside the horses. Yielding her for a moment to Dirty Dick, he mounted, then took his captive on the saddle before him. As rapidly Dirty Dick mounted, then led the way out of the thicket.

Not a word more passed between them. Dirty Dick seemed to divine the intentions of his master by instinct, and avoiding the beaten road, bore away toward the South-west.

Steadily they proceeded, riding as rapidly as the nature of the ground would permit, only drawing rein when the gray light in the East told of the day dawning. Then they halted in a small valley, forming as snug and secluded a retreat as even the most anxious of fugitives from the stern grips of the law could wish for.

Dismounting with his captive, and leaving the horses to the care of Dirty Dick, Raymon Salcedo removed the choking gag from the painfully-distended lips of the poor girl, then unbound her hands.

“If I have seemed harsh and unlover-like, darling,” he said, in that old, soft, mellow tone, “you must blame yourself. You were mad, darling, and had I suffered you to take your own way, your screams would have brought the enemy upon us, slain me, and doomed you to a fate worse than death a thousand fold over—”

“Better that than a captive in your hands, assassin!” flashed forth the maiden, the scales forever fallen from her eyes. “You basely deceived us all—and then murdered them—”

“If you mean your father and mother, Lura,” was too swift interruption, “you are on the wrong trail. I did not touch them—”

“He did—and his hand is yours in this foul work!”

“True—Dick did quiet them when he saw that they were making too much trouble—but he did not kill either one or the other. They are safe enough, and will welcome you back with open arms—”

“You are deceiving me now, as you did before,” passionately cried the girl, driven to frenzy by the memory of her terrible wrongs. “I saw them fall—I heard those horrible blows—I saw the red blood—merciful heavens!”

She staggered back and would have fallen, but for his supporting grasp. That now loathsome touch revived her fainting energies as if by magic. She pushed him away with a shudder of disgust and horror.

A red spot flamed in either cheek as he saw this, and his voice was full of poorly-suppressed anger as he spoke.

“You are acting very foolishly, Lura, even supposing I am the great rascal and impostor which you seem to think. All I told you back at the house was truth itself. There are letters now in Marysville for both your father and myself, proving all I claimed. So I would have told him, when he came back, but I saw that for the time being he was mad—that he would refuse to listen to me—that he would have killed me in your very presence, only for the prompt interference of my faithful friend.

“I was driven frantic by seeing all my hopes dashed to the ground—my best intentions misinterpreted; and I—forgive me, darling! In my madness I struck you!”

“The manliest act you were ever guilty of!” flashed the desperate girl. “Had you only killed me outright, even as you murdered my poor father and mother—”

“Hush, girl!” he said, angrily. “I tell you they are living and well—that they will welcome us with open arms, when once those letters are read, and they understand that I have been wronged. Then we will forget all the clouds, and in marriage—”

“With you? Rather death a thousand times! I know you now, Raymon Salcedo—the villain who deserted his wife and child—who foully assassinated a priest to hide his other crimes—”

“Beware, girl—don’t crowd me too hard, you will be the sufferer!” he snarled, showing his teeth at last.

But the fighting blood which she inherited from her parents, was boiling in Lura’s veins, and she scorned the warning.

“Does that mean you will deal me another coward’s blow?”

“A blow—yes; but not such as that which you bear on your temples, little fool!” he cried, casting aside the mask he had worn so long. “A blow that will pierce your heart, yet not kill. A blow that will make you sue on your knees for what you now affect to scorn! Bah! that is talk enough. I’ll act now!”

His face was that of a demon. His strong arms wound around her like the deadly folds of a serpent, and his hot lips swooped down upon her face.

But only for an instant. Then he staggered back, red blood spurting from his side as a pistol exploded.

“Thousand devils! girl, you have killed me!”

CHAPTER XXII.

DIRTY DICK VOWS VENGEANCE.

DRIVEN to desperation by the knowledge of the frightful peril which threatened her—a danger revealed by the devilish light in the eyes of Raymon Salcedo, even more plainly than was indicated by his words and actions—Lura Martin struggled frantically to escape that crushing embrace, to avoid those loathsome lips. Her hand struck against the revolver hanging at his hip, and scarcely realizing what she was doing she jerked it from its scabbard, raising the hammer and thrusting its muzzle against his side as she pulled the trigger.

With that sharp, unearthy cry which so frequently indicates the reception of a death-wound, Raymon Salcedo relaxed his grasp and reeled dizzily away, the life-blood gurgling from beneath his ribs!

At the first sound of angry voices, Dirty Dick had approached from where he was attending to the wants of the jaded horses, but then hung aloof, reluctant to interfere, though even his blind love for this reckless desperado could not entirely smother his disgust at such brutality against one apparently so helpless.

His face white, his fists clinched tightly, he turned away, afraid to linger lest his natural manhood should assert itself, and he lay violent hands on his master, his god!

Then came that report—that cry of agony—and he turned to see his wounded master stagger and fall, while the pale-faced maiden still held the smoking revolver with which she had been so providentially armed.

His snarl of fury warned Lura, and as he leaped forward, death in his face, his eyes like those of a maddened wild beast, she cocked and leveled her pistol, crying sharply:

“Stand back! One foot nearer and I’ll kill you!”

As well think to appease a wounded grizzly with tender words—to check the leap of a lioness defending her cubs!

Straight on he rushed. Desperately she fired. The bullet tore through the side of his face, making a wound from which the red blood flowed freely, but not the faintest sign did he give of feeling the wound. Straight on he came, and before the poor girl could move aside, or cock her weapon again, his sinewy arms crushed her to the ground and tore the revolver from her grasp.

An involuntary scream for mercy burst from her lips. A hideous laugh answered the appeal.

“Such as you showed to him, cuss ye!” he snarled, rudely rolling her over upon her face, and binding her hand and foot. “Ef he’s dead, you die too!”

With wonderful rapidity he had wrought, and not a minute had elapsed from the time the first shot was fired until Dirty Dick left his captive and knelt down beside the bleeding form of the master he loved better than life, better than his own soul—more than all the world besides.

“Speak to me, boy Ray—speak to your old Dick, an’ say you ain’t dead—that you’re only tryin’ to skeer the cussed old fool!” he uttered, huskily, his fingers trembling so violently that he could hardly cut open the garments, already soaking through with blood. “Tain’t only a graze—jist a little wipe across the ribs, sech as you’ve often laughed at. You’re jist foolin’—jist trying to skeer me, boy Ray—I know ye bet! But ye wouldn’t, if ye only knowed how it hurts—how it tears the heart plum out o’ my ribs! Sech a darned old no-count fool as I be!”

So he spoke, the blood dripping from his face, it and the pain of his wound unheeded—for there was a wound in his heart a thousand-fold more bitter! He tried to believe his words—tried to smile, and only succeeded in giving a grimace more horrible than ever before showed itself on human countenance—tried to laugh, but gave birth to a gasping sob instead.

Ignorant, uncouth, ugly, sin-stained and crime-hardened, yet there was this one redeeming quality: mortal man never loved more wholly, more purely than he. Pity that he chose such an undeserving subject to worship—raised up an idol that instead of elevating and purifying him, dragged him deeper down into the mire of sin and degradation.

When the clothes were cut through, Dirty Dick hesitated to part them, lest his haunting fears should be more than realized, but a painful groan from those lips, now ashen gray,

warned him that he was wasting precious moments.

He separated the garments, and laid the wound bare. At the first glance, he read the truth. Raymon Salcedo was shot through the lungs. Only a miracle could save his life now.

Instantly Dirty Dick became a changed being. His fingers no longer trembled, but were steady as rock, though touch of woman could not be more gentle and tender than his as he deftly dressed and bandaged the wound.

Scarcely had he finished, when the wounded man opened his eyes and recognizing the face which bent over him, muttered:

“How is it, Dirty Dick?”

The words were purely mechanical, for knowing that face so thoroughly, he read his sentence written upon it, even before he gave shape to the thought.

“I never told you a lie in all my life, boy Ray,” the old man replied, his voice hard and cold, without the faintest trace of the terrible agony which had been so marked during those first few minutes. “I can’t begin now. It couldn’t well be any worse. The lead’s riddled your breathin’-box. Nobody this side o’ the good Lord himself kin save you now!”

A short, hard laugh, sounding horrible, coming as it did from the lips of a dying man.

“And you doubt His performing—a miracle—on behalf of such—a miserable sinner as I!”

Unable to speak more, his eyes closed again.

“You don’t ax about her—that she-devil as shot ye,” said Dirty Dick, in that same painful, monotonous tone. “I ketched her before she could run. She shot at me, but the lead didn’t hit—”

A faint laugh from the wounded man, then the words:

“Go look—in the spring—your beauty spoiled—forever, Dick!”

Mechanically, Dirty Dick arose and obeyed, just as he might have done in the old time had Raymon Salcedo bidden him blow his own brains out. He saw the blood. He put the tip of his finger into the wound, but not the slightest change came over his face as he returned and sat down again by the side of the man who was more than all the world else to him.

“Mebbe she did hit me. I didn’t feel it. Ef we could only change places—ef you could take this an’ give me that, it’d be better an’ more even. Don’t look right to take the boy an’ leave the old man—”

“Dick,” suddenly uttered his master, “where is she?”

“Over yonder. I tied her up to wait for what’s coming to you.”

Quietly, coldly, as he spoke, Raymon Salcedo had no difficulty in understanding all that the old man meant by that grim speech, and it seemed to lend him fresh strength.

“Set her free—take her back home, Dick. God knows I’ve done her harm enough already! Take her home, then come back and bury me. Don’t let the folks at home know how I died. But first, take her home.”

“Yes, boy Ray; she shall go home—never fear; she shall go home.”

If Dirty Dick thought to deceive the wounded man, he counted wrongly. Suspecting the truth, Salcedo added:

“Swear to me that you will not harm a hair of her head—swear that you will take her home alive and unharmed. Swear, Dick.”

“I won’t hurt her more than I kin help, boy Ray,” was the slow response, in that same peculiar monotone. “But you ax more than I kin promise. I’ve already taken a solemn oath. To hang her by the neck afore the breath lets your body git cold.”

“You shall not!” and the wounded man struggled to rise, but was restrained by those strong bands. “If you injure her, my curse shall haunt you all your life!”

“Which won’t be long, boy Ray,” was the reply. “I’ll hev vengeance for your death. I’ll bury you. An’ then I’ll take your trail an’ ketch up afore your sperrit kin travel far. In death, jist as it was in life, boy Ray, I ain’t no a’count by myself, but mebbe I kin serve you some on the last trail, even as I hev here on airth. Whar you go, thar I go, boy Ray, to heaven or hell—if I hev to fight to get in.”

There was no response to this strange speech. His feeble remnant of strength exhausted, Raymon Salcedo fell back, as one already claimed by death.

Dirty Dick bent over him for a moment, then swiftly arose and passed over to where the horses were tethered. Taking a coiled lasso from where it hung on the horn of a saddle, he returned to where the maiden lay, trembling in every limb, for she had heard all of that strange conversation, and knew that this madman—surely his brain was turned?—firmly intended to execute her for firing that death-shot!

With terror-distended eyes, she watched him fling one end of the lasso over the horizontal branch, then form a running noose in its well-greased, pliant rawhide rope.

“Mercy!” she gasped as the old man bent over her and raised her to a sitting posture. “Spare me! I was not to blame. You heard what he said. I was only defending my life—”

“I don’t know only one thing,” was the re-

sponse, in that horribly cold, unmoved tone. "You shot him. He's dyin'. Only for you he'd be all right. I'member hearin' a preacher say once—them as takes life, must git rubbed out in turn! That's the way it stan's now. You killed him, I hang you. Then I bury you both, an' blow my own brains out. Ef it'll make death any easier to you, I'll take a oath that I'll kill myself."

Lura Martin shivered with horror. The fiercest denunciation would be easier to bear than this stony composure. In that there would be some hope, however faint, of making an impression. In this, there was absolutely none.

Yet still she pleaded, for life was sweet—never sweeter than now, though all had looked so black and desolate to her but a few moments ago—her parents dead, foully murdered, her lover proved even worse than dead: a perjured traitor and assassin.

Piteously she pleaded, scarce conscious of the words she uttered, vainly trying to shake that horrible noose from about her neck, the bare touch seeming to choke her, though the rope above her head still hung loosely. Not the slightest change came into that blood stained face to tell that her pleadings were heard and understood. So far as outward expression went, she might as well have addressed her prayers to a statue of stone.

Handling her gently as far as mere touch went, Dirty Dick moved her trembling form so that she was propped up by the tree-trunk, and from whence she could have an unobstructed view of Raymon Salcedo, lying so still and ghastly, on the grass.

"Ef you think it'd smooth the trail you've got to travel any, you kinsay your prayers. Some people believe in them things. I know a red-skin kin die easier after he's sung his death-song. Mebbe it's the same way with this. I can't say fer sure."

"Ef you thinks that way, pray all you like, but don't make too loud a fuss. They's jist one chance for boy Ray. Ef he's startled and roused up now, that one chance is blotted out, forever. An' when it goes, you go too."

He tightened the noose by drawing the lasso further over the limb, until it stood straight as the string of a small bow, then letting out the slack as he went, passed over to where the wounded man lay, squatting down beside him so silently that his movements would not have disturbed a sleeping man.

He looked into the ghastly face of his master, where the past half-hour had wrought a terrible change, but what emotion he felt—and from his supreme love for this erring youth, it must have been agony the most intense—was not visible to mortal eye. It was as though his face had been suddenly frozen, leaving the power of motion to his eyes and lips alone, and beyond that dull red glitter, leaving them without the ability to express any emotion in themselves.

Like some hapless bird in the toils of a rattlesnake, poor Lura Martin watched him, all hope vanished, unable even to pray as he had suggested. She knew that words would not move him. That on the life of Raymon Salcedo her life hung. Crushed and stupefied she sat there, the noose of the lasso around her throat, awaiting the terrible death that seemed so certain was to be her portion.

Lower bent that stony face over the wounded man. Dirty Dick felt that the crisis was near at hand. Yet he knew there was nothing he could do, only wait and watch. If the fiat had gone forth, death it would be.

The only evidence of emotion was in his bony fingers tightening their grasp upon the rope. Then—

The wounded man feebly raised his head. Broken words fell from his lips. He uttered the name of Lota Sylva, his deserted wife. He spoke of that little black-eyed boy, then fell back once more, a convulsive quiver running over his person.

"It's the end o' the trail on airth fer him. Git ready to foller, gal!" said Dirty Dick; and then he arose, pulling steadily on the rope, lifting the doomed girl clear of the ground.

CHAPTER XXIII.

JOAQUIN AND HIS SPY.

It was noon of the day succeeding the blowing up of the dam, and of Three-Fingered Jack's unsuccessful and disastrous attack on the ranch of the Martins, that two men met before the door of the little stone building where Moses Levi pulled the wool over the eyes of his rough customers in more senses than one. Both seemed weary and travel-stained, both cast a swift glance up and down the street, as though to make sure they were not observed by other and unfriendly eyes, then the door opened and gave them admittance.

"Well?" said one, as he unlocked the door and sunk heavily into a chair, pulling off his slouched hat and with it wig and beard, revealing the handsome features of the noted outlaw chief.

The other was Joaquin's favorite spy, Pedro Gonzales; but that old complacent look was gone from his soxy features, his face was deeply lined, and the black half-moons of fatigue and loss of sleep lay heavy beneath his eyes.

"If it only was well!" he uttered, almost with a groan:

"What do you mean? What's gone wrong now?" sharply demanded Joaquin, very plainly not in the best of humors.

"Perhaps you know part of it? Three-Fingered Jack—"

"What of him? What of Manuel Garcia?"

"He made a business call last night—"

"At the Martin ranch?"

"Yes, captain. Unfortunately for him, there was another party called, also, and seemed offended at finding him—"

"Drop that!" growled Joaquin, his eyes glowing savagely. "I'm in no humor for fantasies now. In one word—what about Manuel Garcia and his mission?"

"The attack a failure, every man of his company killed, and Jack himself being chased by a score of Yankees under lead of that American, John Lynch," was the swift reply.

A frown black as night, a spasmodic clinching of the hands—then Joaquin was himself again.

"Do you know this, or speak only from rumor?"

"The first, captain. Indeed, I saw the most of it—"

"You? I left you on duty here in town."

"I know, master," said the spy, humbly, his face turning a sickly yellow, for he had serious doubts about the manner of reception which would be given the startling communication he felt obliged to make. "The foul fiend has been making an *olla-podrida* of everything! The most infernal luck!"

"Go on," said Joaquin, softly—but it was the softness of the tiger, never so dangerous as when purring. "You have bad news to tell me. Go on. Make a clean breast of it. Unless you are very much to blame, your many past services will more than balance the account. Go on."

"If not aided by the devil himself, then it was through the cunning of Satan that Lota Sylva threw dust in my eyes—"

"You have let that woman escape you?"

"Only for a time, captain," was the hasty reply, for there was something in the chief's voice that Pedro Gonzales knew boded him evil. "She is safe enough now, and he, also—"

"Whom do you mean by he?"

"The old man, her father, Manuel Sylva. She fooled me—put a sleeping powder—maybe 'twas poison, for I've been crawling all over, inside and out, ever since—in my wine I guess, for when I woke up, she was gone, child and all."

"I thought possibly she had run over to see her father—forgetting for the moment that we had kept her from even suspecting his being near—and hastened to see."

"There was the Scorch, fairly wild, just bringing back the old man. I lay low and listened, thereby learning that Manuel had run away, and catching a glimpse of Raymon Salcedo, taking leave of Henry Martin, had accosted the latter and told him everything, painting the young man a very devil."

"The Scorch, hunting for his ward, found him just settling out on foot after the rancho, who was riding toward home like mad."

"I waited to learn no more, but gave the word to three good fellows, and left town as fast as I could, feeling sure that there was going to be a row at the Martin ranch, and hoping to save Raymon Salcedo, for you, captain."

"Go on," was the only words Joaquin vouchsafed this speech.

"If there was a quarrel, it was over before we got to the spot, for hearing a man talking to himself and cursing, we took to cover. Lucky that we did so, too!"

"Leaving my mates under cover, I stole forward to investigate, and saw her—Lota Sylva—meet the man, calling him husband, pleading with him not to deny her, and all that, and he cursing her, swearing that he knew her not, while she had ruined his hopes forever, so busily, that they passed me by so close that I could have touched either one of them, had I made the attempt."

"The shadow soon hid them from me, and I was following, when I heard both the woman and the baby cry out—then the sound of a heavy blow."

"I was puzzled. I was almost sure that Raymon Salcedo had killed the poor girl in his anger, and if so, then she was beyond all aid. And he would be desperate, if interfered with. You said he must not be killed, nor even captured until you gave the word. It was a puzzle."

"At last I stole around to where I left my mates, and, telling them what I had seen and heard—but mentioning no names—asked their advice. They were no anxious to meddle, and said so plainly enough. So, according to rule, having heard all they had to say, I followed my own ideas, and we crept forward to investigate."

"There was no sound coming from the little clump of timber and undergrowth. If it was as I thought, then we could do little good, but I always like to get at the very bottom of everything I undertake, so I said nothing and crept on."

"It was a ticklish job, for I knew not but what he was still there, and unless report lies most famously, Raymon Salcedo is a perfect tiger when his blood grows hot. And your strict orders finding our hands, too. If he pounced upon us, we could only fight with our heels."

"Since you are here, alive and even unhurt, of course you did not find this famous fighter," commented Joaquin, his thin lip curling with an undisguised sneer.

Though the best of spies, skillful and reliable far beyond the average of his class, Pedro Gonzales was by no means averse to blowing his own trumpet, and dearly loved to enhance the value of his services by setting forth in detail all the difficulties which had or might have stood in the trail he was obliged to follow.

None knew this better than Joaquin Murieta, but he was likewise aware that any attempt to cut short the detailed account, would only serve to lengthen it. Therefore, though fairly burning up with curiosity, he smothered all outward manifestations of impatience, and suffered the nimble tongue to run its course.

Pedro Gonzales, nowise disconcerted by the sneer, deftly rolled up a cigar and lighted it. Then he answered:

"Not one foot, with weapons in hand, true; but—"

"Not dead?" exclaimed Joaquin, leaning forward, his face fairly purple, great veins standing out on his temples.

"No, not dead," was the hasty response, for the spy was quick enough to see when real danger threatened. "Not dead, though when I first saw him, I could have taken my oath that such was the case. It was a mighty unpleasant picture for peaceful men to stumble across!"

"There they lay, a stray moonbeam falling across his face, her bosom, and the head of the youngster—all bearing blood-marks—but strangest of all was the absence of drawn weapons."

"Beware, Pedro!" muttered Joaquin, warningly. "I am not in the most delightful humor to-day."

"And for that very reason I mean to steer clear of anything like a falsehood," was the quick response. "I may lie to others—all in the way of business, you know, captain—but to you! I respect my own bones too highly for that!"

"Go on—you are losing time," growled Joaquin.

"I have to go slow over such a crooked trail, captain. Never before have I attempted to follow another such—never again do I wish to encounter another so complicated!"

"You found them. It was Raymon Salcedo. You say he was marked with blood, but not dead. Now continue."

"I had gone one step further, captain, I said that not one of the three—counting the little brat—had drawn a weapon."

The outlaw chief settled back in his chair, resigned to the inevitable. Pedro Gonzales was like a mule in one respect. He could keep going at a famous rate, under the spur—but it was all up-and-down, not one pace forward. Give him his own way, and he would reach the goal in the end; but the time would be fast or slow, just as he chose to make it.

"That was what bothered me, at first. I saw that he had been stabbed, besides an ugly lump on his skull, where a revolver butt had fallen, none too softly, either! She, too, had been knocked down. Only the youngster was unhurt, sucking away as if for dear life. Some one had done the work; but who? why? and where were they now?"

"Two of those questions would have been easy to answer, had it been day instead of night, but all in the little opening was dark as pitch, save where that one ray of moonlight fell."

"I only waited to be sure that he was not dead, then bade my mates watch by him, taking away his weapons and keeping ready to cut short any outcry he might try to make on recovering his consciousness, and set out to find those who had done this neat job."

"I had my trouble for my pains. Not a living being could I find anywhere near the spot, and more puzzled than ever, for I just remembered seeing and feeling a nugget-pin and watch-chain on the senseless man. That put an end to the idea of footpads, for they would have stripped their game."

"It all had an air of mystery that I did not like. More than once I caught myself looking over my shoulder and throwing up my hands to ward off a blow that fell only in my imagination. I hastened back to the clump of timber, meaning to take the woman back to the house, and him with her; either as prisoner or guest, just as you might decide when you heard the whole affair."

"But while on the road, I made a discovery that altered my plans," added Gonzales, then pausing to light another cigar.

Joaquin said nothing, but there was a peculiar glitter in his eyes that warned the spy not to try his patience too far.

"I found them all right, Lota Sylva having recovered her senses. She said they were stand-

ing talking together, when she saw a dark form rise up behind him, and use a knife, while another man struck him on the head. With a wild cry, she sprung at the assassin, but the next instant was knocked senseless. She had not seen their faces, nor even enough of their forms to recognize them.

"I bade the men carry the senseless body between them, to town, and the woman followed willingly enough. Strangely enough, considering all that happened in those parts shortly afterward, they got through all right—"

"He is here? In town? Where?" demanded Joaquin, his eyes gleaming, his voice harsh and husky.

"At the Scorchers' house. Old Manuel, Lota, the child and the man. He is alive, but badly hurt—"

"Come—lead the way—I must see him and have my revenge on him before he dies—"

"Wait a moment, chief," said Pedro, not offering to arise as Joaquin excitedly sprung to his feet. "There's more to tell. I am sorry to say that there's been a great mistake—"

"What in?" demanded the outlaw. "Raymon Salcedo—"

"Lota says it is him—he says it is not; that his name is Theodore Freeman. And he is right!"

For one instant Joaquin stood like a man turned to stone. Then he cried, sharply:

"You swore that they were one and the same!"

"And so I believed, most firmly. But I was mistaken. Lota was mistaken. And so were you. The story he told all along was true. He is Theodore Freeman. We were following the wrong trail."

So far he spoke, but no further. With a howl like that of a maddened wild beast, Joaquin leaped upon him, knife in hand, fairly frothing at the mouth with fury.

Luckily for the spy, his chair gave way, and they both fell to the floor, the heavy shock knocking the knife from the outlaw's hand. Swift as thought those sinewy fingers closed about his throat, slowly but surely choking the life out of him. Madly he struggled, desperately he strove to utter the words that might give him a reprieve, and at last he succeeded, thanks to the table which fell upon them and broke that death-gripe.

"Mercy—or never know where—where Raymon Salcedo—is!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SPY REDEMMS HIMSELF.

NONE too early came that gurgling cry, for the separation carried Joaquin close to his knife, and snatching up the blade, he again grasped the spy, the weapon quivering for a blow. But those words struck home. The gleaming blade hung suspended over the panting spy for a moment, then, as if afraid to trust himself with it in his grasp, Joaquin flung the steel across the room. Its keen point penetrated deep into the oaken door, and the weapon stood there, a significant menace.

Joaquin arose and set the overturned table on its legs, replaced the scattered chairs, then spoke to Pedro Gonzales:

"Get up and take your seat. Tell me a straight story, without any doubling or evasion. You were fully warned, but you presumed on the long indulgence I have shown you, and but for an accident you would be a corpse this instant. The next time I will burn powder instead of using steel, and you may not come off so well."

With a sickly smile, Pedro Gonzales arose, smoothing and rearranging his disordered garments, furtively feeling of his discolored throat as though to make sure that all was right in that quarter.

Curious though true, he bore Joaquin no malice for that well-nigh fatal attack. In that respect he was like certain dogs whom we all have known—the more you beat and abuse them, the stronger their affection.

Yet even after so harsh a lesson, the spy could not entirely throw aside his old habit, and persisted in telling his curious story in his own way and fashion. But it was plain enough that he kept a close watch on every motion of Joaquin, ready to anticipate any fresh outburst, not by force of arms, but by cunning speech.

Joaquin saw this, and knowing the peculiar nature of the man, felt sure that he knew he held his pardon in his own keeping, and feeling half-ashamed of his violent outbreak, settled himself back in his chair prepared to listen in silence, let the trail be never so long and wind ing.

"All this I did not know, did not even suspect at the time, master," the spy resumed, his voice a little husky and uncertain in its notes, thanks to that fierce gripe. "When I bade my mates bear that senseless body here, I was just as certain it was that of Raymon Salcedo as Lota Sylva was. And when a woman in good faith points out a man as her husband and the father of her child, a woman whom one knows is wholly sincere in making such a claim, the keenest of us all may be pardoned for making the same mistake."

"You are sure there is a mistake, then?"

quietly asked Joaquin. "That all the time you have been working on a wrong scent? That Raymon Salcedo is not, has not been lurking in this section at all?"

"On the contrary, he has been here, he is still here, or within a few hours' ride of where we sit," was the quick response. "It has been a cunning trick, most admirably played. Some of the points still puzzle me, but you may be able to unravel them, when I have finished my report."

"The reason I sent my mates on to town and remained behind, was this: I discovered two horses tied in the deepest part of the timber. No one was near them, that I could discover, but I decided to find out what was in the wind."

"Starting the men, I crept back toward the cover where I found the horses, but laid low as I heard horse's hoofs. It was the ranchero, Henry Martin, riding toward town."

"He had scarcely passed out of my sight before I heard him halt and cry out in an angry tone, mentioning the name of Theodore Freeman. Then came a shot, a heavy fall, and the struggling of a horse, such as they make when suddenly brought up at the end of a lasso."

"A little good creeping took me to where I could see two men standing over a body—and one of those men was Raymon Salcedo! I was amazed—petrified! I had left him only a few minutes before, in the hands of my mates, three stout fellows, and he wounded, dying as we all believed. Yet here he was alive, well, free—for I firmly believed that the two were one and the same man."

The spy paused, as if to give Joaquin a chance to express the proper amount of amazement; but the outlaw said never a word, his face cold and hard-set, his eyes alone betraying any emotion, and that of a sort that served to hasten the speech of the spy.

"I heard the other—it was the filthy rascal they call Dirty Dick—call him by name, and receive a stern warning to use the other name—Theodore Freeman. Then there came the sound of hoof-strokes, and they took to cover."

"Manuel Garcia rode up with his band, and stopped by the ranchero. At first I thought of making myself known, and securing their help to capture Raymon Salcedo, but I knew what a devil Jack is when he smells blood—and in such perfect cover, those two rascals would not be taken so easily. Then, from what Jack said, I knew that he had orders from you to do the job at the Martin ranch, which the sound of firearms might spoil; so I lay low."

"After Jack rode on, I could just distinguish the sounds of voices from the cover beyond, but prick up my ears as keenly as I might, not one word could I catch. Then I saw the two men step out into the road, one going south, the other north. I decided to follow the last, for it was Raymon Salcedo."

"All at once I lost him in the darkness. Somehow it was my bad night, though I never worked more carefully. Try all I would, I could not find him again."

"Then from the house came the sounds of firing, and I knew that Three-Fingered Jack had caught a Tartar. I believed that Raymon Salcedo by some means had got into the house ahead of them, and I stole forward to join the band, and urge them to take him alive, when I heard the Vigilantes coming, guided by that rascal, Dirty Dick!"

"I barely had time to take to cover, when they swept past me."

"The boys must have heard them, too, for they made a rush out of the house, only to be shot down like mad wolves. Of them all, only Manuel Garcia got away. He killed two men, took one of their horses, and fled—nearly the whole band of Yankees following him. If he escaped—which I strongly doubt—then the devil must have stood by him still!"

"By this time my wits were all mixed up. I did not know what to do, which way to turn. I fancied some of those bloodthirsty demons were hidden in every bush, ready to pop me over the moment I stuck my head out of cover, so I lay close, awaiting with fear."

"Still the chain of surprises were not at an end. I heard the clatter of horse's hoofs in a gallop, and peering forth, I saw the dead man—Martin, the ranchero—dash past me, his wife riding behind him!"

"They entered the ranch—then came loud cries—and a few moments later, out dashed Raymon Salcedo and his man, the former bearing the girl—Martin's daughter—over his shoulder!"

"Of course I followed them, and I meant to stick to the trail this time until I run them home, or else lost my life in the attempt."

"As I suspected, those hidden horses belonged to them and I got close enough to them to hear their words, when Raymon Salcedo bade his fellow go and see if she—he mentioned no names, but I understood his meaning, easy enough—was beyond working any mischief."

"I knew then who had struck down Lota Sylva and Theodore Freeman, and I knew, too, that instead of one, there were two men playing for the ranchero's daughter!"

"Dirty Dick came back and reported. Raymon Salcedo went into a furious rage, but his

man soon calmed him, and mounting their horses, they rode away."

"Luckily for my hopes of following them to the end, they did not take to any beaten track, but kept along under cover, for fear of being discovered, no doubt. Anyway, I kept close to their heels until nearly day, when by a bit of hard riding, when the ground was more favorable for horses, they distanced me and threw me off the track."

"You lost them, then, after all?" cried Joaquin, sharply.

"Only for a time," was the quick response. "It did not trouble me in the least, for I knew that when daylight came, I would have to fall back anyway and trust to following by sign instead of sight. I needed a few minutes to catch my breath, so the break came in handily enough."

"I was just starting out on the trail, when I heard the crack of a gun or pistol, a long ways ahead, then a faint scream in what I believed was the voice of a woman."

"Some men would have run toward the spot from whence these sounds came, but not I. If from her lips that cry came, I would find out soon enough by sticking to the trail. If not, then it did not concern me in the least."

"It took nearly an hour of good, careful work before I found the end of the trail—lucky for the girl that I was so soon! Another minute, and all the men on earth could not have saved her life!"

"Out with it!" growled Joaquin, unable to longer contain his hot impatience. "What had happened—what was happening? Curse your long-winded droning! In one word, or—"

The hiatus was filled by a cocked revolver held in the fist planted on the table between the two men.

"That rascal, Dirty Dick, was hanging her—had her fairly drawn clear off the ground, when I rolled him over with a blue pill between the eyes!"

"And the other—Raymon Salcedo?"

"It was not my fault—I did all I could!" huskily muttered the spy, shrinking from the leveled pistol, evidently fearing to utter the whole truth lest in his rage Joaquin send a bullet through heart or brain.

The outlaw chieftain saw this, and after a moment's hesitation, replaced his weapon, saying slowly:

"I will bide my time. If I find that I have been cheated out of my just vengeance through fault or carelessness of yours, I will kill you like a dog! Go on. Where was Raymon Salcedo, when that hound was hanging the girl?"

"Lying on his back in a puddle of his own blood—not dead, but badly wounded. How it all came about, I know no more than you, for when I went forward, the girl was senseless, Dirty Dick stone dead, and Raymon Salcedo so badly wounded that he knew nothing of what was going on around him."

"No doubt the girl shot him, either because he assaulted her, or else in hopes of escaping. That much is clear enough, or else why was Dirty Dick about to hang her, unless for vengeance because of his master's being shot?"

"Never mind speculation. What did you do? Where is he?"

"He was too badly hurt to be moved. I examined his wound, meaning to fetch him here for you to play the surgeon, but found that the attempt would surely kill him. So I took the best one of the two horses and rode here—"

"You left them alone!" blazed up Joaquin. "You left him there to die—to be killed by wolves or other prowling wild beasts? When you knew how above all price I valued his life? If you did and harm comes of it—"

"No," hastily interposed the spy. "I left them in good hands—"

"Whose?" demanded the outlaw chief, more moderately.

"Luis Guerra was one—two others of the family. They heard the firing, and stole up to see what was in the wind. Luckily they recognized me, and leaving them on guard, I mounted and came here as fast as horseflesh could carry me. You were not here when I first came—"

"And you have lost a good hour, in telling what might have been put in a dozen words!" stormed the irate chief, rising from his chair and beginning to put on one of his many disguises. "If harm has come of it—if I find that Raymon Salcedo is dead when we get to that spot—if he died within an hour of my arrival—I swear that I will serve you just as I have sworn to serve him! You shall hang like an egg-sucking, sheep-stealing cur!"

Pedro Gonzales grinned sheepishly as he responded:

"If so, I will die as I have lived—your true and faithful slave, master! Maybe I was wrong—maybe I was foolish, but if I had told the end in one breath, as you say, you could never have realized all that I had done—how hard the task was. And more than that, you would have blamed me for all that has gone crooked. Either way, I saw rocks ahead, but I was resolved to have all the credit due me as a scout and spy, even if death should overtake me later."

So characteristic of the man was this explanation, that Joaquin was forced to laugh,

despite the strong passions which filled his heart. And the spy laughed also—in his sleeve—for he knew that his life was safe enough, after that.

CHAPTER XXV.

RAYMON SALCEDO CONFESSES.

THE account given Joaquin Murieta by his spy, was a true one in all particulars. He came up at a most fortunate moment for poor Lura Martin, whose feet had been dragged clear of the ground; whose body was already convulsed with the torture of slow suffocation. Cold as ice to all outward appearance, stern and merciless as fate itself, Dirty Dick was hanging her as the only vengeance he could exact for the death of his idolized master.

Luckily Pedro Gonzales had the skill and nerve enough to back it, to send his lead straight through the brain of the avenger. Without a moan or groan, Dick Sleeper fell forward upon his face, and the half-bung maiden dropped to the ground, limp and senseless.

It was long before she again awoke to consciousness. For hours she lay there beneath the limb which had so nearly proved a gallows, fortunately lost to all sight and feeling. The marvel is that she ever awoke to sanity, after all that she had that night been forced to undergo.

When consciousness returned, she stared wildly around her for a few moments, her brain a hazy blank. She saw the green foliage about and above her, then came a low muttering sound, and with a half-recollection of what had transpired, she struggled to a sitting position.

The corpse of Dirty Dick had been dragged aside and cast into a clump of bushes, but there was the little pool of mingled blood and brains, marking the spot where he fell, and yonder was the haggard face of Raymon Salcedo, his body propped up by a pile of green boughs.

It all came back to her then, and with a gasping cry of fear and horror, she sought to arise, to flee. But her hands were still bound behind her back, her feet tied together just as Dirty Dick had served her, long hours before.

His ghastly, deep-lined countenance was like the face of a corpse, but from out their depths, the black eyes of Raymon Salcedo glared with an insane fire. At her cry, they rested upon Lura. A flush of red came into his cheeks, and he began to talk, his voice husky and rattling, his words so indistinct and jumbled together that the terrified girl could not distinguish one from another.

It seemed to her that it was a dead man addressing her—a corpse trying to upbraid her for having caused its death; and a piercing shriek burst from her lips as she closed her eyes, averting her face and shuddering with horror.

A moment's silence, then she heard the quick trampling of human feet, and believing that help was approaching, she cried aloud in a frenzy of mingled hope and fear:

"Help! for the love of Heaven, do not desert me now!"

A sobbing cry of great joy burst from her lips as a short-built, dark-featured man pushed through the bushes. At that instant he seemed to her almost an angel—the first and last time Luis Guerra was ever so maligned!

"Stop howling—make noise like dat some more, I put stopper in your jaw—you hear?" he growled, frowning angrily, shaking one dirty fist at the poor girl, who could not, would not understand him.

"Oh! sir, if you are a gentleman—by the memory of your mother, your sister, of all on earth that you hold dear—"

"Stop talk!" he growled, picking up a switch and shaking it threateningly in her face.

That action could not be mistaken. Poor Lura began to realize the terrible truth. Instead of freedom, she was still a captive. She had only changed masters.

"Stop!" said a husky voice, and Luis Guerra turned swiftly to Raymon Salcedo, who was looking straight at him. "Give me some drink—wine, water, anything—only drink!"

The Mexican hesitated, but it was only in doubt as to the class of drink he was to bestow. A low whistle, and two other Mexicans came out from the bushes. One was old and gray-headed, the other young—a mere boy. Both were far more intelligent looking than the first outlaw, yet it was plain enough that they were wholly under his control.

"Drink, you cut-throat curs!" hoarsely muttered Salcedo.

The three Mexicans interchanged quick glances. Before leaving them in charge, Pedro Gonzales had been careful to impress on their minds the importance of their charge, and that if possible he must be kept alive until he could return with Joaquin. Yet they hated to minister comfort to a man who spoke to them in such terms, in tones of such perfect contempt.

"After all, what matter," grunted Luis Guerra. "Bring the dog some fresh water, Sanchez—"

"No water—wine—brandy!" sharply interposed Salcedo. "Bah! you cowardly wolves! I heard all that he told you—that skulker, Pe-

dro Gonzales. Refuse, and I tear open my wound—then you can settle with Joaquin when he comes."

He ceased—his head fell back and his eyes closed. That swift speech wore him out, and he looked so much like a dying man, that Guerra leaped to his side and held a copious leather flask to his lips.

Salcedo opened his eyes, but kept his lips firmly closed until the Mexican yielded the flask to his clammy grasp.

"Now go, dog! when I want you again, I will call," he said, his voice faint and rattling, but his spirit as strong, proud and haughty as of old.

With a savage grin, the outlaw fell back. Only for his wholesome dread of Joaquin, he would have answered those insolent words with a knife-thrust.

Raymon Salcedo put the flask to his lips and drank eagerly. The fiery liquor lent him the strength he desired, and his face looked less startlingly like a corpse, as he turned it toward the maiden, who sat with head bowed, the picture of woe and utter despair.

"Miss Martin," he said, speaking in English, his voice soft and low, his enunciation perfectly distinct. "As a dying man, I humbly beg of you to let me explain. There is much that you should know, and if I were to die before telling it, there are others, scarcely less innocent than yourself, who might have to suffer through life for my wrong-doing. You will hear me?"

Lura raised her head and looked at him. Only for that wide blood-stain upon his clothes, she saw the perfect reproduction of Theodore Freeman when she and he first met. The liquor had flushed his face, and driven from it the dread pallor of death. A pendent bough cast a shade upon his features, and seemed to fill out the lines and hollows his terrible wound had wrought. It was the face of her lover, when at his best.

She knew that this man was no more what her fancy had painted, than a devil is like an angel of light; yet as she heard that soft, mellow voice, as she saw that gloriously handsome countenance, the poor girl felt her heart leaping swiftly with the old love which she had believed dead forever!

She could not speak. She simply bowed her head.

The wounded man smiled faintly. He could read her thoughts as readily as though she had put them into words.

He was not wholly evil, else he would have kept silent, and let the wrong he had done her, live after him.

"You remember the story that woman, Lota Sylva, told you last night? Well, she was mistaken—"

"Theodore," cried Lura, passionately. "They say you are dying. Do not soil your lips with a falsehood now, when you may be called upon so soon to face your God!"

A short, reckless laugh. Then that low, smooth voice again:

"It would matter little on my account, my dear, but for your sake, I am going to speak the truth. I swear it by the grave of my mother! And that is an oath I never violated."

He paused to drink a few drops of liquor, then resumed:

"The story she told you was true. I did marry her. I killed the priest who united us, when I grew tired of her, and longed for my freedom again. Killed him lest he should bear witness against me at some time in the future. All that was true as truth itself. But the rest was false. It was not her husband whom she claimed. So far as I know, your lover is your lover still—true to you in thought and deed."

He laughed softly as he saw her startled look, her utter amazement. Saw it change to an expression of sad, almost holy pity, for she believed that he was raving, that the pain of his wound had driven him mad!

"It is hard for you to believe? Or do you not yet understand that while I am Raymon Salcedo, I am not Theodore Freeman?"

A gasping cry from the poor girl. It was she who was mad!

"Listen, lady," he said, as soon as he had swallowed more of the stimulant that alone enabled him to speak clearly. "Try and comprehend me, for my strength is failing. I alone can clear up the mystery—unless you try to understand what I say, you may live in misery all your life."

"I am not Theodore Freeman. I never spoke a word to you in my life before last night, when I entered your house by the chamber window while Joaquin's band of cutthroats was attacking you. By the Judgment which I must soon face, I swear this!"

"And he—Theodore?" gasped the maiden, faintly.

"Was—and is—well worthy your love, if ever mortal man could be so. While I was plotting to remove him and take his place, which I knew could be easily done, thanks to the really marvelous likeness which we bore to each other in face, form, voice—everything save character—I set cunning spies to work, to search out any flaw, any weak spot in his armor, but they one and all failed. I intercepted

the letters he and your father were expecting from the South. They bore him out in all that he claimed."

"Thank God!" murmured Lura, the glad tears streaming down her pale cheeks.

For the time all else was forgotten. Her heart had not betrayed her. He whom she loved was well worthy the passion.

For a few moments Raymon Salcedo kept silence, letting her realize the glad truth to its utmost extent. But he had much more to say, and he felt that his strength was rapidly failing him. He had little time to waste.

"Pardon, lady, if I beg that you will listen to me yet a little longer. Now that you know it is a stranger who is making free confession of all these crimes, you will find it less painful to hearken."

"It was pure accident that gave rise to my scheme of stepping into another man's shoes. I came here, poor, having lost my fortune—no matter how. I and my friend—poor, faithful Dick!—by chance discovered that there was much gold on your father's land—enough to make us rich for life."

"I had no money to buy. I was not satisfied with the claims which I could have entered and held, by virtue of discovery. I wanted all; and when I saw you and Theodore Freeman together, when I learned that he was your favored lover, then I fancied I saw my way clear to gaining my ends. I resolved to kill him, and taking his place, wed you, thus becoming heir to the whole property, then the rest would have been easy to manage."

"I meant to spring the trap last night. I was near enough to see and hear all that took place in your house, and then for the first time I learned that my deserted wife had traced me out, had told my story to you, had denounced me—as she supposed Theodore Freeman to be—before your face."

"I followed her when she fled from the house. Poor Dick tried to keep me in check, but failed. I was like a madman, then. I saw that all my cunning scheming was ruined."

"While in that state of mind, I found them together—my wife and your lover. She was pleading—he denying her claims, declaring that she had blasted his dearest hopes, ruined his future; yet he never raised so much as a finger against her in anger, as I hoped he would—to save me the trouble."

"Well, I lay low as long as I could, then leaped upon them, and killed them both—as I believed at the time. Nay, lady," he hastily added, as Lura, speechless with horror, stared at him, "I did not kill them, though you owe me no thanks on that score, for I fully believed both were dead when I left them. They recovered and fled, or were rescued—anyhow, when I sent Dick back to the spot, they were gone."

"I must be brief, for there is much which I wish to explain, and I feel my race is nearly done."

"When I left them, I meant to retreat to where our horses were hidden, and flee from the scene of my ruined plans. But fate was still against me."

"I heard your father riding rapidly toward town, and as it chanced, he saw me as he was passing. He believed me to be Theodore Freeman. He called me by that name, and in his rage at the wrong which he supposed had been done you, he rode toward me, swearing he would flog me off his estate."

"At that instant a bold plan flashed across my brain, by which I saw a chance of winning the heavy stakes for which I had entered, after all. And so—I shot him, dead as I thought then. I was wrong—and I am glad now, seeing that matters have turned out against me, as they have, that I failed to kill him."

"Before I could make sure that he was dead, Joaquin's men came along, and Dick and I had to take to cover. They captured the man, found the body, and from their talk I learned that they went to attack the ranch, kill all but you, and turn you over to the tender mercies of Joaquin himself."

"When they passed on, I sent Dick for help, then hastened to save you, if one man could do it. You know the rest. I gained an entrance, and meant to carry you off, leaving the rest to be massacred by the outlaws. Satanic, was it not? Granted: but far-sighted, after all. With you the sole survivor, the rest would be easy. I could, as Theodore Freeman, smooth over the past, and—win all!"

His factitious powers seemed to fail him all at once. He turned pale as a corpse, and his black eyes rolled wildly. He tried to raise the liquor flask to his lips, but could not.

Lura saw his extremity, and uttered a sharp cry that brought the three Mexicans in hot haste from their cover. Excitedly they crowded around the wounded man, shutting off her view.

Was he dying? Or had he already passed to his account?

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE VENGEANCE OF JOAQUIN.

SCARCELY an instant did this tableau remain thus. Then Luis Guerra lifted his head with the wild, hunted look of a wolf. He rushed over to where Lura Martin sat, pale and awe-

stricken, caught her up from the ground, one palm pressed firmly over her lips, smothering the cry of affright which rose in her throat at this savage assault. Bearing her in his arms, the outlaw plunged into the densest part of the undergrowth, lying flat and holding his captive prostrate as he swiftly hissed in her ear:

"Make noise—I give you knife like dis!"

A glittering blade flashed before her eyes, and descended until the keen point penetrated the clothing directly above the heart. Once more death threatened the unfortunate girl.

Luis Guerra's comrades were equally swift in taking cover, for they all caught the same sounds—the rapid thud of horse's hoofs at no great distance, growing plainer and more distinct with the passage of each moment.

Their first and most natural thought was that Pedro Gonzales had returned, with their chief, but such men as these, whose lives have been forfeited by a thousand crimes, are seldom caught napping or found running any unnecessary risks.

Scarcely had they taken to cover, when there came a signal that instantly relieved their fears, and answering it, the three outlaws stepped out from the underbrush, just in time to respectfully salute their chief, Joaquin Murieta.

He paid them not the slightest attention, but leaping from the saddle, bent over the body of Raymon Salcedo, his face as pale as that of the seeming corpse.

Just beyond the clearing, peering through the foliage which he parted with his hands, his anxious eyes and the tip of his long, thin nose alone visible, stood Pedro Gonzales, ready for swift and cunning flight should Raymon Salcedo prove to be dead, and Joaquin find himself robbed of his vengeance by that unnecessary delay at Marysville.

Fortunately for the spy, the breath of life still lingered in the lacerated lungs of Raymon Salcedo, and as he saw Joaquin part the tight-clinched teeth of the wounded man with the point of his bowie-knife, pouring some brandy, drop by drop, down the throat of his enemy, Pedro Gonzales drew a long breath of relief and entered the little glade.

"You haven't let her escape, Luis Guerra?" he demanded, after one keen, comprehensive glance around them. "If you have, take the advice of a friend and get beyond reach of cold steel and hot lead before the captain remembers to ask about her!"

Guerra closed his teeth with a surly grin as he nodded his head in the direction where Lura Martin lay.

"I took cover with her when I heard you coming—long before you gave the signal!"

"That was his fault, not mine," muttered the spy, in guarded tones. "He was like a madman, through fear that he would reach here only to find his man dead meat."

"The breath of life is in him, but that is all," responded the squat-built ruffian in like tones. "Joaquin may squeeze that breath out, but he can do no more. The fellow is past feeling any pain of body."

The spy cared to say no more after the uncomfortable misgivings aroused anew by this positive assertion. The hatred and vengeance of Joaquin would hardly be satisfied by the quick and painless death of Raymon Salcedo, and in his disappointment he might remember how much valuable time had been wasted before the spy had fairly opened his budget.

Still, he hardly dared run away, and with a vague idea of using her as a sort of safeguard, Pedro Gonzales raised the trembling form of Lura Martin in his arms and carried her out from the dense cover.

Joaquin saw or heard nothing of this by-play. His whole attention was devoted to his bitter enemy, whom he now met for the first time since that black day when his brother Carlos had suffered death by hanging at Hangtown, and when his own back was so mercilessly scored with lashes at Murphy's Diggings—both foul outrages on wholly innocent men.

A snarl of ferocious delight hissed through his white teeth as he saw the eyes of Raymon Salcedo open, and gradually fill with the light of reason as well as consciousness.

One moment of perplexed scrutiny, then a feeble smile lifted those jet-black mustaches.

"So you have come at last! But too late—for you."

"Not to kill you, Raymon Salcedo! Not to avenge my poor murdered brother, as far as your pitiful life can atone for his!" muttered Joaquin, hoarsely, his eyes glowing like fire-balls.

"To snuff out my breath—no; to torture me as you swore—yes."

Faint and feeble though his speech was, the dying man spoke firmly enough, even contemptuously; but it was only for a moment. A spasm of exquisite pain convulsed his entire person, and Joaquin, fearing that these were the last throes preceding dissolution, snatched up the noose which Pedro Gonzales had thrown aside after freeing Lura Martin, and hastily fitted it about the throat of the young Californian.

The touch seemed to rouse the dying man, even while it crushed out all traces of that

reckless defiance which he had until now showed his enemies.

"Mercy!" he gasped, painfully. "I am dying, now—let me draw my last breath in peace!"

"Yes—the same degree of mercy which you showed him, dog, accursed hound of Satan!" cried Joaquin, his words hardly distinguishable as such, so overpowering was his fury. "He met the shameful death like a man—looking death straight in the face, because he knew he was innocent. You—you will whine and cringe like a very cur!"

At this juncture came an interruption from a quarter entirely unexpected by all concerned.

Uncertain how his master regarded Lura Martin, and naturally very solicitous to do nothing more which could possibly turn his rage in that direction, Pedro Gonzales had cut the thongs which bound the maiden's hands and feet, standing guard over her. But when he saw Joaquin place the noose about the throat of his enemy, the spy darted to the other end of the rope, ready to play the part of executioner.

Thus left at liberty, Lura Martin forgot all the wrongs she had suffered at the hands of this poor wretch, and rushing forward she grasped the outlaw chief by the arm.

"Spare him—as you hope for mercy hereafter, have mercy now! He is dying—let him breathe his last in peace."

With a fierce curse, Joaquin turned at that touch, his knife flashing forth; but his uplifted hand slowly sunk to his side as he saw who faced him. The fire in his black eyes grew less keen, and the hard lines on his dusky face softened.

"Do you know for whom you are pleading, lady?" his voice hard, but no longer menacing. "He is not your lover—not Theodore Freeman, but Raymon Salcedo. He would have ruined you, soul and body!"

"I know—I know all," said Lura, more firmly. "He has made full confession, and did all he could to make reparation. But he is dying now. You could only shorten his life by a few pitiful minutes—very little to you, but of what measureless importance to a poor sinner who has yet to make his peace and plead his case with an outraged and offended God!"

Raymon Salcedo listened to this unexpected intercession with even more astonishment than even Joaquin felt. It passed his comprehension that one whom he had caused so much bitter pain, of both mind and body, should plead his cause with such feeling and energy.

His yielding manhood was restored, and with it a portion of the strength which he as well as the rest believed gone from him forever. He no longer feared the death which hung over him; no longer gave thought to himself, but all was for her.

"I never thought to ask you a favor, Joaquin Murieta," he said, speaking rapidly, as though he feared his voice would fail him ere all was said. "But I do now. I do more—I beg this boon at your hands—I would pray for it on my knees, had I strength enough left to support myself!"

With a swift motion the outlaw chief raised his hand, a black frown upon his face.

"Spare your breath, for you have none to waste. Think you I would grant you what I must refuse her?"

A low, faint laugh, sounding strange on the lips of a dying man.

"I am not pleading for myself, but for her. Work your will on me. For one minute I was weak—now, though dying, you shall see that I am not wholly lacking in nerve."

Raymon Salcedo paused, through weakness of body, and almost involuntarily turned his sunken eyes upon the flask of liquor which Joaquin still held. A moment's hesitation, then the outlaw chief granted his unspoken desire. Eagerly the dying man drank, and with the fresh strength born of that fiery draught, he spoke again:

"Even if you hated her as bitterly as you hate me, I have made her suffer enough to appease your hatred, if you could only realize all she had endured. If there is a single spark of manliness left in your nature, you will be satisfied by sacrificing me, and will set her at liberty."

"So! you are not pleading for yourself?"

"No. I do not say that I would not like to live longer, for that would be a lie on its face. Even now, when I know that, if left alone, I would be a corpse within the hour, life is very sweet—very dear! But even above that, I now hold her life and honor!"

"Neither of them was ever in danger, save from you, and such vile reptiles as you," sternly cried Joaquin. "I admit that through her I meant to make you suffer—when I believed you were the other, her accepted lover—but even when my rage was hottest, I never once contemplated injuring her in the foul manner you dare to hint. An outlaw I am—made such by the foul deeds of your class—a robber, a murderer—all that people curse me for, perhaps; but I never have, never will wage war on either women or children."

"Do not flatter yourself that I grant her her

liberty at your intercession. The instant I learned that you were not Theodore Freeman, not her lover, but a vile impostor—that instant she was nothing to me.

"Lady," he added, turning to Lura, who could not yet comprehend the glad truth: "I humbly ask your pardon for the pain and anxiety my men may have caused you. You are free to go when and where you will. It would be dangerous for you to travel alone and unguarded. Pedro Gonzales!"

"Yes, captain," quickly responded the spy, advancing.

"You will place yourself at the disposal of this lady. Guide her whither she wishes to go. Guard her with your life, for if aught of harm befalls her, I swear that I will follow and kill you, though you fled to the very end of the earth!"

"And him—you will spare him?" faltered the maiden.

"Lady, there is a limit beyond which even you must not pass," was the stern reply. "That wretch has forfeited his life a thousand times over. Do not force me to regret having ever met you. Do not oblige me to remember that your father and your lover are among my most inveterate foes—that they have sworn to hunt me down and slay me like a wild beast! Go! you can trust the man whom I bid guide you home. Go—and may your future life be happier than mine. May the wrongs I have suffered never fall upon you or yours!"

Eager to leave the spot and hide from the eyes of his chief until his mad passions had ample time to cool, Pedro Gonzales forced Lura Martin away from the spot.

Joaquin signed to him to take the horses which had borne them from Marysville, and silently watched them until they rode away out of sight. Then he turned once more to the dying man.

Half an hour later. With folded arms, Joaquin Murieta stood gazing upon the motionless corpse of the man who had so foully murdered his brother. Not lying supported by the pile of brush, as when we last saw him. Instead, dangling in mid-air, suspended by the neck, having suffered all the agonies of slow suffocation.

A frightful vengeance, and doubly so from the fact that it was inflicted upon a man already dying. But was it more than a just retribution? Remembering all that he suffered through the cunning arts of this unscrupulous man, was Joaquin Murieta so much to blame for this terrible deed?

The next morning all Marysville enjoyed a frightful sensation. A corpse hung by the neck before the door of the hall where that indignation meeting was held. On its breast was a card:

"RAYMON SALCEDO: HUNG FOR MURDERING CARLOS MURIETA!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THREE-FINGERED JACK'S GRATITUDE.

WHEN Three-Fingered Jack opened his eyes again, it was not in the sulphury realms of Tartarus, unluckily for the rest of humanity; but with the scent of roasting meat in his nostrils and the deep chorus of a German drinking song saluting his wondering ears.

The fumes of cookery sent a gnawing pain through his pinched-up stomach, and with a husky cry he sought to arise—but in vain.

That cry brought a heavy-built, profusely-bearded miner into the little hut—a German, as both looks and speech indicated. The outlaw greeted him with a savage growl, for he attributed his inability to arise to the bonds of a prisoner doomed to death, rather than mere weakness.

"Something to eat, curse you!" he snarled, more than ever resembling the wolf after which he was so frequently called. "If I am to hang, you needn't starve me first!"

The German laughed, frowned, shook his head, gesticulated wildly with his great hands, then rattled off a string of words which puzzled Jack to the full as much as his own Spanish had nonplused the German.

Jack ground his teeth and snapped them together like the close fitting jaws of a spring-trap, for he thought the burly miner was mocking him in his helplessness; but the German nodded a dozen times in swift succession, then rushed out of the shanty, to return, in a few moments with a slice of hot elk-steak.

Jack was hungry—so the simple fellow interpreted that savage gnashing of teeth, and Jack did not attempt to undeceive him, but snatching the meat, tore it to shreds with his discolored fangs, then motioned the miner to fetch him more.

Luckily for himself, Jack fell asleep before the German could prepare a fresh supply, else he might have died of a surfeit. As it was, he awoke toward evening, still weak, but able to rise from his couch and get outside of an enormous meal, while the honest digger, by a liberal use of his hands, face and nearly every member of his body, was explaining how the outlaw had been found and succored.

The provisions which he had brought with

him while prospecting for a good opening, gave out, and with his trusty old yager, he set out that morning in quest of game. Striking the trail of an elk, he followed it until the end: in this case three dead bodies and a fourth in not much better case.

It only required a glance to divine what had happened, and on examination he found that while severely scratched, Three-Fingered Jack was not much the worse for wear. Cutting off a leg of the dead elk, he shouldered both it and the senseless man, carrying them to his hut; when there tenderly washing and bandaging the hurts of the stranger, not forgetting the swollen ankle.

All this Jack managed to understand, and also continued to assure the honest German of his heartfelt gratitude, only to be checked as soon as the digger divined his drift. He had done nothing that required thanks. No more, or they would quarrel. See! he had just a few drops left in his flask—poor stuff for one weaned on buck beer and rhine wine! but better than cold water when friends would quaff each other's health. They would drink—would have a good time—eh?

Three Fingered Jack fell in with the humor of his simple-minded host, and they drank while the vile liquor lasted, then embraced warmly and swore, each in his own tongue, to remain comrades and brothers-in-love for life.

Jack was acting true to nature, for by nature he was all treachery and deceit. The German was honest as he was simple-hearted, and when that union of hearts was duly ratified by a warm embrace and fraternal kiss, he still further opened his heart and gave the cunning outlaw to understand that he had "struck it rich."

Jack grinned and nodded, and seemed to accept the assertion for all it was worth—but so adroitly did he play his part that the German, hurt, rather than angry at having his word doubted, unearthed his secret hoard, and exhibited it to the doubter.

"Two hundred ounces, as I'm a sinner!" ejaculated Jack; then, well knowing that his host could not comprehend a word he might utter, he added: "And you're the softest fool I ever did see! If you had kept this secret, for once in my life I'd have let slip a chance of slitting a weasand, because you've treated me like a prince in disguise. As it is, old man, day-dawn will find you with a wider mouth than Nature provided you with—and a few inches nearer your grub-basket, too!"

Poor devil! The honest German interpreted the speech of his guest in accordance with the smiles and nods which accompanied it. They were friendly enough, and he never once suspected what a terrible price he was destined to pay for his trust and childlike confidence.

Covertly, yet closely, Three-Fingered Jack watched the miner when he replaced his treasure, marking its surroundings until he could lay his hand on it in pitchy darkness, if necessary, then declared that he needed sleep more than anything else.

The German insisted on yielding up his comfortable bunk to his guest, taking the bare ground himself, and ere long he was asleep, dreaming of home, of the flaxen-haired frau-lein who was anxiously awaiting his return with that long dreamt-of fortune. "Oh!"

A single guttural groan—a brief, convulsive quiver of the mighty limbs, and then the poor digger lay still, no longer sleeping, but dead—the assassin's knife in his heart!

"A fool and his money are soon parted!" quoth Three-Fingered Jack, stirring up the fire, and by its light kneeling beside the victim of his foul treachery, to make sure that he was dead. "It will be an amusing story to tell the boys; though I'll have to swear to it on the cross before I get them to believe that any man could be so simple!"

Two days later Three Fingered Jack rejoined his fellows, who had given him up as dead.

NOTE.—What is given in this volume concerning Three-Fingered Jack is the plain truth. He openly boasted of killing and robbing the poor German, and was prouder of that dastardly exploit than almost any other in which he was concerned.

J. E. B., Jr.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CONCLUSION.

BUT little more need be added to this chapter from the history of Joaquin Murieta. He had sworn bitter vengeance against all those who shared in the unprovoked murder of his wife and his brother. The reader has seen how he kept that vow, in part, at least.

One week after the corpse of Raymon Salcedo was found hung before the door of the City Hall, another ghastly sight greeted the startled citizens—one even more shocking than the first.

A corpse hung just as the other had hung. On its breast, pinned fast by a dagger driven to the hilt in the center of the paper, was a card, signed as the first had been, by Joaquin Murieta. "Died for Carmela." So the legend ran.

So horribly was the carcass mutilated and scarred, as the surgeons declared, before death had come as a happy release, that for hours no

one recognized it. Then the awe-stricken whisper went around that it was all that remained of Parson Jules Thibault!

Don Manuel Camplido—John Vanderslice—Jules Thibault—this was the end of a sinful life!

Pedro Gonzales conducted Lura Martin safely home, where she found both father and mother alive, though the former hovered for months on the brink of the grave, and the latter never entirely recovered from the trials of that black night.

For days and weeks, Lura was so busy nursing them back to life, that she had hardly time to spare for thoughts of her lover, who had so strangely disappeared. But then he returned white, weak, only the ghost of his former self, but none the less welcome to that true hearted girl, who could never wholly forgive herself for the wrong she had done him, misled by purely circumstantial evidence.

He was warmly welcomed by all three, for ere this Henry Martin had heard the strange story from the lips of his child, and had received the letters from the South, so long expected, so long delayed. There were many apologies, much talking, laughing, sighing and—love-making of course!

But Theodore Freeman had a sad story to tell; one that explained his long absence, and did honor to his heart.

Poor Lota Sylva never recovered from the cruel blow dealt her on that eventful night by her recreant husband. She lingered for weeks, her only comfort being found in the presence of Theodore Freeman—Raymon Salcedo as she fondly believed, until death at length claimed her.

The young man knew that his honor was cleared, for by the orders of Joaquin, Pedro Gonzales told him and Manuel Sylva all; but he knew that only his daily presence kept the poor mad woman alive and so he crushed down his own longings, and only left her when he could be of no more service, either to her or the poor old father, who died on his knees beside the grave of his murdered daughter.

Burying them both, Theodore Freeman took charge of the orphaned child, and it may be stated here, that little Ray never felt the loss of his real parents, for Lura and her husband formally adopted him, and treated him precisely as they did their own children.

When Henry Martin was able to leave the house, he and his son-in-law searched the estate, finding the valuable gold deposits which had aroused the cupidity of Raymon Salcedo. These were promptly developed, and in due course of time, both Martin and Freeman were classed among the richest men on the Slope.

As for Joaquin Murieta and his band, they were hunted so sharply and persistently by the Vigilantes under John Lynch and others of the same stripe, that they were forced to abandon that section of the country, fleeing to the wild region around Mount Shasta. But wherever they went, their trail was marked by bloodshed and rapine.

The end was drawing near, however. The blow, long avoided, was to fall at last, sure and deadly. Until it did fall, Joaquin's vengeance was never lost sight of, neither by himself nor others. The memory of the latter was kept freshened by the deadly blows which followed each other in swift succession.

THE END.

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